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# “Argentina is cumbia”:

## Sociocultural Trajectories of Young “Cumbieros” in Urban Peripheries

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### Abstract

This article analyses the sociocultural trajectories of a group of young men with a low socioeconomic status, all cumbia musicians and producers. The cumbia is one of Argentina’s most popular music genres due to its mass dissemination and the social class of the people who have historically enjoyed it. The tension between agency and structure and the relationship between class and culture will be the main themes explored in this article. By focusing on the family, education and work trajectories of these youths, I examine their relationship to cumbia music. Who chooses to become a cumbia musician, and why? I also examine the meanings of “good” versus “bad” music” and the aesthetic and moral parameters used for its definition. This brings me to class belonging and how it shapes musical choices and facilitates disruptive trajectories. The article is based on biographical interviews conducted between 2012 and 2014, combined with participant observation at cumbia dance clubs in Greater Buenos Aires.

**Keywords:** Argentinian popular music; class-culture; cumbia; individual agency; social structure; sociocultural trajectories

### Introduction

This article analyses the sociocultural trajectories of a group of young men with a low socioeconomic status, all cumbia musicians and producers. Cumbia is one of Argentina’s most popular music genres because of its mass dissemination and the social belonging of the audiences who have historically consumed it (Alabarces and Silba 2014; Cragolini 2006; Semán and Vila 2011; Silba 2011). Cumbia is not only played during festive gatherings but also serves as an accompaniment to people’s everyday lives (see DeNora 2000).

Questions surrounding youth and music and the connections to music production sparked my interest in exploring the trajectories of these young musical men. During work conducted for my doctoral thesis (Silba 2011), the social actors I researched—musicians in different cumbia bands—were criticized for their supposed lack of artistic ability. Doubt was thus cast on the quality of the music they produced, and by extension, the cultural competence of both the musicians and their audiences, since, theoretically, musicians and audiences shared a certain class belonging and, with it, associated cultural practices. The cumbia music industry is a key actor in this context. Music critics have used the term “artistic dearth” to describe the industry, arguing that it is nothing more than a profit-making scheme (Pujol 1999; Semán and Vila 2011), as evidenced by cumbia “cookie-cutter bands” (Cragolini 2006), which are musical groups that are nearly impossible to differentiate from one another. In this context, I began to devise a critical cultural analysis to question some of the general assumptions about the overall quality of the music and its makers, assumptions laced with (and conditioned by) a high degree of “common sense” and aimed at homogenizing a social reality that is unquestionably much more complex. In keeping with Becker, “in the absence of real knowledge, our imagery takes over” (1998: 15).

The challenge was to become familiar with the broad context of cumbia music production in order to debate and deflate these assumptions, and the first step was to find out more about these young people. By delving into their family, education and work trajectories, I came to understand how they had each forged a connection with music over time. In terms of their ties to the music industry, the questions I asked were about how these young men got in touch with music producers, managers and/or nightclub owners and managers, and, later, what kind of relationships they formed. The methodology was guided by biographical interviews conducted between 2012 and 2014 in the Greater Buenos Aires metropolitan area and supplemented by participant observation at cumbia dance clubs and rehearsals by some of the cumbia bands. An ethnographic approach based on my immersion in the different dimensions of the lives of the social actors played an important part in this study, providing in-depth knowledge of the meanings of their practices and representations through observation and involvement in their activities. Utilizing this approach, I was constantly aware of Cardoso de Oliveira’s caveat:

In the act of listening to an “informant”, the ethnologist exercises an extraordinary “power”, though she attempts to position herself as the most neutral and objective observer possible. This power, which is at work in all human relations, enfeebls the cognitive act in the researcher/informant relationship, where questions formulated by an authority who seeks

specific answers (regardless of whether the questions are posed in an authoritarian manner) create only an illusory field of interaction. In fact, there is no true interaction between the native and the researcher, since by using this individual as her “informant”, the ethnologist does not create the conditions for an actual “dialogue”. It is not a dialogical relationship. If instead the informant is transformed into an “interlocutor”, a new relationship can (and should) develop (Cardoso de Oliveira 1996: 5).

Therefore, the challenge was also about being able to create the conditions for the dialogical act (Bajtín 1998), while becoming the interlocutor of each of these musicians and trying to downplay the informant–researcher connection as much as possible.

I am also interested in reflecting here on the way that certain social hierarchies are orchestrated within cumbia culture in relation to meanings of “good taste” (in music), “good or bad music”, and “good or bad musicians”—especially in terms of who defines these, and the aesthetic and moral parameters employed for their definition (Frith 1998; López Cano 2011; Trotta 2011). In this regard, the article explores native meanings of these parameters and reflects on the connection between the class belonging of these youths and their cultural-musical practices (Bourdieu 1984; Hall 1998). Does a low socioeconomic status necessarily entail limited cultural competences for these young men? What competences or accreditations should these youths acquire in order to be able to be considered “good musicians”? In what way does social class and the diverse cultural frameworks it enables shape musical choices, and to what extent do these restrict or facilitate disruptive trajectories? The tension between agency and structure, and the increasing complexity of the relationship between class and culture, are thus two of the main theoretical and political questions at the core of this work.

## Fieldwork

The first step in my fieldwork involved contacting cumbia musicians and music producers for an initial set of interviews. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on three aspects that emerged in the interviews with these actors, namely family, education and work trajectories, and how these related to their entry into the world of cumbia; musical training and their relationship to the industry; and their position toward the discriminatory discourses associated with cumbia (particularly with *cumbia villera*, that is, cumbia from the slums) and, by extension, with their audiences. I will analyse the first two aspects jointly, and in the final section I will tie in the third to a more specific analysis on the construction of (good) taste in music, and how debates surrounding cumbia fit into this construction.

## One Night with La Repandilla

It took me some time to track down Oscar Belondi, the creator, producer and lead vocalist of La Repandilla. I was in touch with one of the musicians, whom I contacted several times about conducting an interview with some of the band members. After a lot of back and forth, my cell phone rang one Friday afternoon at 4pm. It was Cristian, my contact in the band: “At 8pm tonight, we’re going to be rehearsing at a studio in Laferrere,<sup>1</sup> and we’ll be hanging out there until our nightly tour starts.<sup>2</sup> Why don’t you come over? Oscar and all the guys will be there.” Two hours later, I was on my way to Laferrere.

After a long search for the right street, I found myself in front of a small white door. I rang the bell and said I was there to see Cristian. A young man invited me into a small reception area. Cristian soon came out to greet me. It was easy to break the ice as we had a friend in common. Then Cristian invited me into the studio. It was like a dream come true: going backstage with one of my favourite cumbia bands. In accordance with Fabbri (2008: 387), “There is nothing wrong with allowing pleasure to guide us when choosing the topic of our music studies but [...] I believe it is critical not to hide this fact, not even from ourselves”. López Cano adds, “This [awareness of one’s relationship to the topic] is not only useful: taking responsibility for this choice, acknowledging it and communicating it is a basic ethical obligation” (2011: 226).

The rehearsal room measured about six by five meters. At certain spots along the wall, the soundproofing material had peeled off. There were 18 musicians spread on a range of instruments, including winds, guitars, bass, accordion, Octapad, conga drums, güiro, bongo and keyboard. There was a relaxed, fluid exchange between Belondi and the other musicians. When the rehearsal was over, I went out into the reception area with a few of the musicians. They gradually opened up and began sharing their stories about cumbia: how they started playing in local bands in the neighbourhood, learned to play certain instruments by ear, got to know other musicians who were just getting started in different groups (since most were referring to the end of the 1990s, these were generally cumbia villera bands), and how these musicians helped them get their foot in the door.

1. Gregorio de Laferrere is located in La Matanza, one of 135 districts in the province of Buenos Aires. Part of Greater Buenos Aires (GBA), which includes the city of Buenos Aires and surrounding towns, La Matanza is the largest district in the metropolitan area and the most populated in the province.

2. Cumbia dance clubs feature up to three to four bands per night, each playing just a few songs. As a result, cumbia bands are often “on tour” on Friday and Saturday nights, going from club to club until daybreak and playing in up to six venues in a single evening.

I wanted to hear more about their working conditions and find out whether cumbia allowed them to make a living and support a family or if they had other jobs on the side. The story of Jorge Monteverde was particularly telling in this regard:<sup>3</sup>

MS: Does playing with La Repandilla pay the bills?

JM: This is how most of us make our living. Sometimes we play for other groups too.

MS: So you don't do any work outside of music?

JM: Well, sure I do, sometimes. I'm a mason—I've done some work in construction. I'm also a shoemaker but generally I make a living off music (i/v, Gregorio de Laferrere, September 2013).

Monteverde was not exactly reserved about his work outside music (masonry, shoemaking), but from the look in his eyes and the tone of his voice, my presence and questions were making him uncomfortable. At that point, it became clear that “the dialogue” Cardoso de Oliveira (1996) describes would not take place. Instead, that illusory field of interaction had prevailed, one in which an artist—a musician who had enjoyed a moment of fame and social recognition—was obliged to explain having to combine his artistic activity with other semiskilled trades in order to support himself.

### **Belondi, El Pandillero: “Cumbia villera voiced the lunfardo<sup>4</sup> from the slums and people didn't like that”**

After speaking with several of the musicians and waiting a long time outside, Oscar, the leader of the band, finally emerged. In relation to his family trajectory and how he found music, Oscar explained:

my mom is a housewife and before he became a waste collector for the city, my dad was a trash picker. We had six horses and six carts and we got by picking cardboard out of the trash. That was what we ate [discarded food], the tips of cold cuts that got left out in the trash. My toys were whatever I found: a car with no wheels, a doll with no arms. Still, I had good experiences, a good childhood. I wasn't the happiest kid but since I didn't know any other way of living was possible, I wasn't unhappy either.

3. Monteverde was one of the founders of a band called Los Continentales del Perú back in 1985. He had been living in Argentina ever since. When he joined La Repandilla, he played percussion and helped teach other musicians in this band and others.

4. Lunfardo is the term for the particular slang spoken in the city of Buenos Aires, jargon whose origins date back to the wave of European immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century.

[In my family] no one's a musician except for my youngest siblings. I started out banging on pots and pans in my parents' kitchen. I would listen to music and tap out the rhythms. I like rock, reggae, salsa... When I was 10, my parents gave me my first drums and finally the sound I was making didn't sound like clanging; it sounded like percussion. That's when I started playing in some neighbourhood groups: they would come looking for me, not because I played so hot, but because I had the instrument. It was like being the only guy in the neighbourhood with a soccer ball. So that's how I started playing with a bunch of groups, each with its own style, and I began to get some experience (i/v, Gregorio de Laferrere, September 2013).

In terms of his musical training, this is what Belondi had to say:

When I got the call [from Yerba Brava], things got a little ugly because my family didn't want me to be singing cumbia villera, *Yuta compadre* (Cops, Man) and stuff like that. My mom would say, "You've got such a nice voice, why waste it on that?" But I didn't really care because to me, music is music, I wasn't worried about "demeaning" myself, you know what I mean? I listened to all sorts of music, I taught percussion and I still teach. I studied percussion too. My drums professor is a guy who plays Christian music—he's the one who taught me the technique that is now my main work tool. I also studied percussion with Jorge Monteverde and Coco Barcala: they taught me how to read music and I would teach the new guys coming in about playing cumbia. That's more or less how it went... (ibid.).

Finally, he discussed his ties to the industry:

I get along OK, I try to adapt. I hate the businessmen behind the whole thing: they exploit the dreams of the kids who want to play, they make those dreams work in their favour. I think that makes the whole business pretty pathetic and it's too bad because I used to dream of being on TV, then I got lucky enough to be working a ton and because I was going places, I met a lot of people that I had to negotiate with to get on TV, to be in magazines, and you're like, "Man, they used to be calling me... Now that they know me, they want to milk me for money". They need you and you don't need them: that's a fact. It's totally ludicrous for a band to pay to be on *Pasión [de Sábado]*.<sup>5</sup> So it wasn't just a dream: If you've got so much, show us what you're worth, right? (ibid.).

### **El Fanta, the All-Terrain Producer: "The worst thing you can do is think about it: you have to feel cumbia"**

Interviewing Martin Roisi, or El Fanta, as he's known in the business, was no easy task. I got his email from one of his partners in La Mágica, a cumbia party

5. *Pasión de Sábado* is a tropical music programme that showcases cumbia bands. It has been airing on Saturday afternoons on broadcast TV since 2002. For a detailed study on the programme, see Spataro (2005).

held every two weeks at different nightclubs in the city of Buenos Aires. After an email exchange, we met at a coffee shop. He was cold and even aggressive, demanding I tell him what it was I wanted to know about cumbia. A lot of his answers were deliberately hawkish. I listened for two hours as he explained his personal scale of worthiness on the cumbia scene. His favourite classification was true artists versus industry-produced bands.

There were several awkward moments, but once El Fanta realized that I wasn't leaving—in spite of his cold treatment—and that I actually knew a thing or two about cumbia, something I made evident when he let me get a word in edgewise, the music producer gradually relaxed and the tone of the conversation shifted. The dialogical exchange that Cardoso de Oliveira (1996) referred to seemed to shift between moments of understanding and authoritarianism, where El Fanta insisted on proving that his version of good cumbia was the real deal.

I'll start with his educational trajectory:

I didn't finish high school. I can't concentrate when I'm reading. I can read a whole book and have no idea what it was about. I get my information in other ways, that's all. I do it just about everything [the bands, the movie, the documentary, the book<sup>6</sup>] (i/v, Buenos Aires, July 2014).

In terms of his work, Roisi explained:

In 2001, I was working as a producer on a TV channel. When the crisis hit, I was left jobless and I started working as a mover. I got a truck and that's what I did for a long time. I ended up living in a slum and I sold cumbia CDs. I always listened to cumbia but in 2001, I started listening to it in a whole new way, [then] I lost my job, took a step down the social ladder, but I didn't let it get me down, instead I started going to the cumbia dance clubs and I started to see what was happening because that was right when cumbia villera was starting and for me, it was just incredible, it was “the magic moment”. Living that experience, it seemed like cumbia was an amazing phenomenon (ibid.).

When I asked him about the musical training of cumbia musicians, he got straight to the point:

Cumbia musicians play by ear, they're working-class people, you feel me? They work the way manual labourers do: they're totally methodical with

6. Martin Roisi has coordinated a range of projects involving cumbia. Besides organizing the cumbia party *La Mágica*, he designed the book *Familias Musicales* (Musical Families), starred and helped produce the upcoming film *Alta Cumbia*; hosted two cumbia radio programmes at the time of our interview in 2014 (one on Radio FM Pasión, and another on Radio Nacional), and hosted the TV programme *Cumbia de la buena*, which aired from 2015 and 2016 on Canal Encuentro, among other activities.

music and that way, the songs come out perfect... People who play cumbia are blue collar, not these bums who play rock, they come at it from another angle (ibid.).

Here, El Fanta pointed out a moral division with respect to the world of rock, just as Garriga (2008) did when he approached the testimonies of his “natives” from a different direction. According to Garriga, rockers place value on their practices and those of others based on a moral gage, whereas cumbia players are *negros* and *villeros*,<sup>7</sup> who don’t bother to “bear witness to social issues in their lyrics” (Garriga 2008: 8) or create something deeper, such as more profound meaning or commitment to a social cause. According to this reading, cumbia is music limited to fun and partying, and rockers look down on cumbia because they see themselves as taking a stand on a range of social issues which they perceive and construct as worthy and valuable. El Fanta acknowledged these discourses surrounding the world of cumbia and its followers, and challenged them by emphasizing the “working class” aspect of cumbia musicians—that is, their class belonging—and by categorizing rockers as “bums,” that is, as subjects whose material needs are met and can thus decide on music as a profession without any real concern about money.<sup>8</sup> To add another layer of complexity here, Semán affirms that “from the beginning, cumbia villera forged a dialogue with rock (a genre that aspires to be socially superior) but from a position of equality, not a subordinate one” (2012: 159–60), though my informant appears to deny any dialogue of the sort.

Finally, with regards to the cumbia audiences, El Fanta added the following:

The people who truly consume cumbia live their life through the songs, through cumbia, that’s their life. The music helps them deal with their problems, though it might seem ridiculous to you. The music gives them the determination to keep going, following the cumbia’s beat... It’s no joke. It’s something so big that unless you’ve experienced it, you can’t even imagine it. That’s why you have to be in the slum, meet these people, understand the situation.

What do these testimonies tell us about my questions? Three central themes can be identified. The first is connected to family and the sociocultural trajectory-

7. *Negro* is, of course, a racial term, but it is often used as a derogatory term associated with class as opposed to being based on racial bias. Similarly, *villero* refers to a slum inhabitant and is another term that carries class bias and suggests dubious morality.

8. In keeping with Vila (2000), it is important to recall that both cumbia and rock have a debt to different music traditions. In the case of rock, the social belonging of both its musicians and audiences were broadly middle class in the 1970s, as also noted by Alabarces (1993). This was radically modified during the 1980s and 1990s when as noted by Semán and Vila (1999) the poor began to appropriate a music that had previously been reserved for wealthier social groups.

ries of these young men. Most of the musicians I interviewed came from poor or working-class families (the sons of manual workers and/or unskilled labourers, among others). Monteverde’s testimony was crucial in this regard because in addition to being a drummer, he had been (or also was) a mason and shoemaker. As for Cristian, when he shared his life story he had no problem in admitting: “I lived in a slum in San Martín”.<sup>9</sup> By his admission, Cristian’s social class and level of vulnerability could be inferred by the associated assumptions about how he lived. However, this did not represent an obstacle to developing his artistic career, although progress often occurred in spite of and not because of the context. In this regard, the concept of agency, as described by Giddens (1993), becomes fundamental, as it allows social actors to intervene rationally and wilfully in the complex structure of cultural production. For Giddens, the structural conditioning associated with agency both limits and enables action, that is, it establishes rules but also provides resources that the actors appropriate and creatively bring to bear in their daily structure. To cite Semán once again,

At the point where economics, different generations and technologies converged, it became possible to create a version of cumbia that wasn’t just any music in the sociological sense: it was a music that accompanied the social construction of a generation, bestowing upon this generation a way to manoeuvre and establish a place in society (2012: 153).

The second question in this research is tied to musical training and the way in which cumbia musicians are criticized for a lack of formal education in music and/or degrees that would make them professionals as opposed to untrained musicians. This can clearly be seen in Belondi’s testimony.<sup>10</sup> He studied with music teachers in the neighbourhood and continued to play, in part due to the ties he forged with others who had learned music the way he had. Other testimonies gathered during my fieldwork indicated similar trajectories. Pablo, Martín’s partner at “La Mágica”, told me:

I attended EMPA<sup>11</sup> for a year and a half. I was specializing in percussion but I took theory, choral practice, music theory. I learned to read music, that’s what I mean. Later I studied with private teachers but guess what? No one teaches you to play cumbia and up until recently, you couldn’t even learn African drumming. They’d hand you an orchestra kettledrum—forget about Latin percussion. I don’t know if it’s because they discriminate against cumbia or what but there’s no music school that teaches cumbia (i/v, Buenos Aires, August 2013).

9. San Martín is a GBA district north of the city.

10. And that of other musicians interviewed during the same period.

11. The Avellaneda Popular Music School. <http://www.empa.edu.ar/> (accessed 15 June 2016).

Maite is the drummer of Cumbia Club La Maribel,<sup>12</sup> an all-female cumbia band, which is fairly rare in the industry. She had a similar story:

My background is rock and blues, I play drums and because of the people I hang out with, when I first started saying “I play with a cumbia band”, I got laughed at a lot. People were like, “Say what? What cumbia do you mean? The cumbia they play here?” [in Argentina] When I started playing with La Maribel, I went to a blues jam session and the joke was, “Oh, there’s a cumbia girl!” (i/v, Buenos Aires, August 2013).

In spite of the biases she faced, Maite continued with the group and learned to play and enjoy cumbia. As a result, she had to study music, but at a completely different place:

Cumbia has its own language and you don’t just inherit it or learn it so easily... I study at the Esnaola Institute<sup>13</sup> and I’m doing a degree in musical performance. It’s a five-year program, plus four years in music teaching. [Now] I pay a lot more attention to the kettledrum because I changed my playing style a little. Thanks to these classes I was taking with this guy [an Esnaola graduate who teaches percussion], now I play standing up, you see? This guy said to me, “Play standing up so you can dance at the same time”, and it’s amazing when you start dancing—if you don’t dance cumbia, it’s not easy (ibid.).

Two points can be garnered from these testimonies. One of these has previously been noted by Blázquez in his work on *cuarteto*:

No local institution specializing in music teaching—public or private—offers courses on playing or composing *cuarteto*, which means there is no degree accrediting knowledge in *cuarteto music*. It can thus be concluded that...the identity of a *cuarteto* musician is forged exclusively through active participation in a musical group (Blázquez 2009: 48; emphasis mine).

The same situation observed in our field with regards to cumbia has thus been observed in Córdoba for *cuarteto*. The other point is connected to what Maite says about the first lesson she learned in a musical genre that was entirely new to her: “to play cumbia, you have to dance to it, feel it, experience it from

12. Since La Maribel is a band comprised of 11 female musicians that perform covers of class Colombian cumbia. <https://cumbiaclublamaribel.bandcamp.com/> (accessed 15 June 2016).

13. The “Juan Pedro Esnaola” Institute for Higher Education in Music offers degrees in musical performance, instrument/singing and music instruction (specific instruments and music education). There is also a high school degree programme in music. <http://escuelademusicajpesnaola.blogspot.com.ar/p/informacion-general.html> (accessed 15 June 2016).

another place”. That other “place” is undoubtedly the body, and it is what allowed her to appropriate the physical experience of the dance as part of the structure that turns the cumbia into a space for pleasure, not only for its audiences but also for those who play it.

To conclude these discussions, one of El Fanta’s reflections is particularly relevant: “The worst thing you can do is think about it: you have to feel cumbia.” British popular musicologist Simon Frith commented along those lines that some music theorists believe they can talk about the meaning of less complex music like pop “without listening to it, without liking it, without needing to know much about it at all. But then the concept of expertise, the relationship of *knowledge* and *pleasure*, is unclear in all musical worlds” (1998: 253; emphasis mine)—that is, unclear regardless of class fractions. For Frith, the positions that require some form of legitimate knowledge to enable appropriate pleasures overlook the fact that pleasure and different physical experiences are also a way to learn and understand music, as argued here. The next section addresses the construction of (what, to some people, constitutes) good and bad music, and why popular music and its associated physical experiences have been increasingly discredited over time.

### **Cumbia Villera, Bias and What Follows**

One topic that emerged in all dialogues with musicians and/or producers was the bias and stigmatization towards cumbia and, more specifically, towards the sub-genre of *cumbia villera*, a bias that has been accompanied by a relatively novel return to “classic” cumbia, that is, mainly Colombian cumbia from the 1950s and 1960s. This phenomenon has been led mainly by more “enlightened” musicians from a higher social class with musical backgrounds in jazz, rock and folklore, and whose orchestras perform covers of the old cumbia. As Alabarces and I have noted in past research:

In the past few years, a complex transformation process has occurred: a politically correct cumbia has appeared, one free from any of the stigmas associated with the poor. Neat, stylized, carefully selected and cured of all its impoverished, provocative and rebellious aspects. Here the geography of cumbia shifts from the poor fringes of the city to the educated urban centre and its audiences shift as well, from the poor and working class to the urban middle classes, who can now dance to it free from bias... what this new cumbia carefully avoids is any contact with that world [of the poor] (Alabarces and Silba 2014: 70).<sup>14</sup>

14. In the city of Buenos Aires, these groups include Sonora Marta la Reina, La Delio Valdez, Todopoderoso Popular Marcial, Orkesta Popular San Bomba, Cumbia Club La Mari-bel and La Cresta de la Olga, among others. Another example is the Orquesta Cumbia Grande

What the cumbia orchestras really do is to “whiten up” cumbia by reconstructing the music’s “legitimate” version. This contributes to a romanticized and depoliticized view of cumbia during that decade, creating the idea that there were no class and/or cultural conflicts that would require thought, discussion or consideration. Second, these cumbia orchestras highlight the supposedly “good” taste of such aesthetic choices and of “legitimate and legitimized cumbias”. Even Pujol (1999) defends the “old school” cumbia and clarifies that since the 1960s, the forms that the cumbia has taken are “not very compelling” in musical terms due to the lack of variety and nuances. Interpretations like these and their spinoff meanings—one of which is the notion of “common sense”—allow the new cumbia orchestras to avoid taking a stance towards the more popular and local cumbia tradition. I refer hereby to the veritable cumbia boom that took place in Argentina in the 1980s and 1990s, especially the first *cumbia villera*. Associated with the marginal population from the city’s periphery, *cumbia villera* provided insight into some of the daily practices of cumbia groups (celebrating drugs, crime, challenges to police authority, etc.) through the straightforward lyrics of this sub-genre. To cite Semán again:

This description of the world is an affront to society’s norms... Talk and even praise of robbery as well as drugs and weapons are generally interpreted as one of two ideal but typical extremes: as the expression of an irreconcilable state of degradation or as the affirmation of a resistance that positions cumbia musicians on the side of idealized political expressions. From the perspective of the first, cumbia is telling it like it is, describing the living conditions imposed by neoliberalism... the expressions of cumbia and the meaning that its listeners attributed to it were not planned as a programmatic denouncement of the sort a political group organizes in a three-step sequence of diagnosis-proposal-propaganda. Yet this by no means suggests a self-deprecating plebianism or the necessary rejection of cumbia by upper-middle class citizens (who break other laws but repudiate anyone who breaks these). The ambiguous value of these crude expressions involve denouncing what was occurring, ironizing about what society at large defined as acceptable behaviour while also encouraging deviance from these behaviours, and expressing pride in a life imagined as luxurious through the use of drugs which were, in spite of their marginal living, possible (Semán 2012: 157–59).

With regards to the backlash against *cumbia villera*, the musicians and producers interviewed were well aware of how discourses like the ones analysed above circulated. Oscar Belondi said:

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from the city of Mar del Plata, whose members are all jazz musicians. Cumbia Grande plays covers of Colombian style cumbia, exclusively instrumentals from the 1950s, which the band refers to as the “golden age” of cumbia music.

[People who look down on cumbia] are ignorant because I might suddenly feel like playing rock and roll, huaynos, cuecas, tinkus, salsa, cumbia or merengue,<sup>15</sup> because music is my trade. But you also have to know that there are guys out there, tremendous musicians, and if they get a call to play in a cumbia band, they’ll take it, because it’s work (i/v, Gregorio de Lafarrere, September 2013).

Belondi then described what cumbia villera meant to him as a channel for communicating everyday experiences, both his own and those of others:

I get my inspiration everywhere, from life, from experience. Dreams play a big part. Calling it *cumbia villera* helped it sell, but this [what we do] is testimonial cumbia. And it always existed, only this music gets right to the point. It doesn’t disguise reality and it uses more vulgar words, the *lunfardo* they use in the hood and I think that’s why it hurts a little, right? Showing the world what this Argentina of ours is really about (ibid.).

El Fanta was even more unequivocal than his colleague:

Certain musicians don’t even get played on TV because they [the media] don’t like *negroes*. *Negroes* gross them out. They’re afraid of *negroes*, that’s all, nothing strange about it... They think they’re vulgar, bad... that’s how it goes in Argentina, that’s the way it works. They can’t appreciate the artistic virtue. People who don’t like cumbia—and generally the media doesn’t like cumbia—don’t take the time to understand it. They lose interest way before that. [At my job] I’m explaining all the time that they’re not *negroes*, they’re not *villeros*, it’s just unbearable for me. I have to do that when I’m on the radio, because the people who listen to Radio Nacional are liberal, and that’s cool, but they look down on cumbia (i/v, Buenos Aires, July 2014).

In terms of the cultural value of cumbia in the face of stigmatizing discourses and practices, El Fanta continued:

Argentina is cumbia. Today it’s where cumbia is most popular, much more than in Colombia or Mexico. So the cumbia of Latin America is here. Argentina’s cumbia is inspired by the pop ballads of groups like Los Iracundos, Los Pasteles Verdes. It’s inspired by these songs and by Latin American lyricists and solo artists. If you ask someone now what they think of Dyango, they’ll tell you he’s fat and vulgar. But the man’s a genius... They don’t know anything. These [cumbia artists] are really special people, very talented artists, even geniuses, but here people just make fun of it. So the *cumbiero* took that and made it into cumbia. Dyango is interpreted by these people in the same way cumbia is, talking about the kind of people who don’t analyse things, don’t think about things... The worst thing you can do is think about it: you have to feel cumbia (ibid.).

15. Huaynos and tinkus are two types of popular music from the Andes; cuecas is the national dance of Chile, but it is also popular in Bolivia and Argentina.

My research participants' views and experiences bring up two interesting points. The first is tied to the construction of criteria denoting good versus bad music, a construction that shines through the testimonies and the theoretical perspectives selected for analysis. In keeping with López Cano (2011), it is necessary to discuss a model of aesthetic judgements within the field of popular music in general and, more specifically, within cumbia. The model functions as a sort of "measuring stick", and establishes what is legitimate and what is peripheral. As part of a social construction that is far from explicit, ideas surrounding "good taste" are in many cases naturalized, as if their criteria were not only universal and intrinsic to music ("good on its own"), but also unquestionable and ahistorical. The second point made by El Fanta is associated with the analysis of, what Fabbri (2008) called, the "principle of pleasure" in the study of popular music. When cumbia is analysed merely in relation to other *musical* discourses, but not within its wider sociocultural contexts, its disrepute is evident. Instead, it is important to focus on what is positive and productive about cumbia to enable a reflection on the pleasures it produces to its participants and the myriad ways in which cumbia is experienced by them.

In terms of good versus bad music, López Cano speaks of "dirty Latin American music", and includes cumbia villera in that category. These types of music are defined as "mass phenomena with clear social relevance and research value [which] are overlooked by academia [as] 'unsterilizable', or in other words 'music more associated with bad taste and the excluded class'" (2011: 227). Meanwhile, Trotta returns to Leme's concept (2002) of the "'malicious streak' [in popular music], which is characterized by an emphasis on sensuality in its dance, its rhythm, its provocative lyrics and bold performances" (2011: 116), that is, music that stages excessive corporealities and language. El Fanta's comments on the absence of cumbia musicians and/or programmes in the mass media are indicative of this dichotomous thinking, which he conceptualized in terms of the prevailing classism and racism (see above interview quote).

The comments reinforce López Cano's argument on the maintenance of class biases disguised as aesthetic arguments to denigrate cumbia. It would seem, then, that when the subject is about cumbia, the type, artist, period, album and subgenre all become irrelevant. Since the poor urban classes are the ones who play, produce, listen and dance to cumbia, the aesthetic arguments become moral all of a sudden: cumbia is music for *negros* (Alabarces and Silba 2014). In this regard, Semán suggests: "Features that are expected and even sought after in other musical genres (repetition, predictability) become musical dearth" (2012: 160). This "musical dearth" stems from biased readings of a phenomenon that focuses the analysis on either the lyrics or the music, instead of taking a more comprehensive approach that would allow

the performances to be evaluated, as was suggested by Frith (1998), Alabarces (2009) and Semán (2012), with all of their nuances and complexities.

Both the experience of the music and the music’s meanings change in complex ways in relation to the style-competence of the [listener], and to social situations in which they occur... music can never be played or heard outside a situation and every situation will *affect* the music’s meaning (Frith 1998: 250; emphasis mine).

In keeping with this reasoning, it is necessary to review the contexts for the consumption, production and circulation of cumbia villera. This can be seen, for example, in the territorial references that emerge in several testimonies. In Belondi’s words, “[cumbia villera] doesn’t disguise reality and it uses more vulgar words, the *lunfardo* they use in the hood” (i/v, Gregorio de Laferriere, September 2013). But the fact that cumbia music arose during a time of unprecedented social and political crises in Argentina does not mean it should be overlooked. Indeed, as an original and provocative musical product, cumbia provides a fertile ground for analysis, including sociological, because it stages important debates and connected sociocultural issues.

The second point, then, brings to the forefront questions surrounding taste or pleasure associated with cumbia, including the music, lyrics and dance. Frith suggests that “music may, indeed, be used in functional terms, but that does not account for the undeniable ways in which it moves us, does not explain the ways in which to listen to music is, indeed, to be *taken out of oneself* (and one’s society)” (1998: 251; emphasis original). This form of “living” music is, thus, equally valid as musical forms representative of so-called high culture (in the Bourdieuan sense).<sup>16</sup> The question, then, is how and in what ways does cumbia move, mobilize and enable aesthetic experiences among its makers and listeners, its producers and audiences? Once again, the insider’s voice provides insight. El Fanta, for example, said that “they work the way manual labourers do: they’re totally methodical with music and that way, the songs come out perfect”. An interview published in the book *Familias Musicales* is particularly relevant in this regard, conducted with Juan Carlos Denis, the creator of *cumbia santafesina* (cumbia from Santa Fe, which introduced the electric guitar):

Interviewer: Within cumbia, what makes your music unique?

JCD: Maybe the philosophy behind the playing is different. I’ve had some arguments about this in the recording studio. We were recording and I was focused on the details, the background vocals, the arrangement, you know. And the tech guy goes, “Once a *negro* has had a few beers, you think

16. From Bourdieu’s approach to this issue, it is possible to infer that the lower classes have little interest in aesthetic evaluations of cultural objects.

he's going to notice?" And I said to him, "Hey, the *negro* pays a lot more attention than you think!" Over time, he admitted I was right. The *negros* have pointed out a thousand tiny errors. Wow, the *negro* sure has an ear for music! (Roisi *et al.* 2011: 5)

We could ask, if listening and/or making music means being taken out of oneself and out of society, why would it make sense to assume, for example, that cumbia musicians only play music to get by or to survive? Or moving past Frith, why assume that their playing is restricted to some primitive pleasure that does not allow them to create, sustain or defend their own model, their own scale of aesthetic values? As Juan Carlos Denis, one of the most renowned and prestigious cumbia musicians, aptly notes above, the "*negroes*" have pointed out "a thousand tiny errors" in his music (Roisi *et al.* 2011: 5). In his offhand comment, Denis points to the existence of a class prejudice against cumbia listeners in Argentina that is expressed through an ethnic-racial slur: the term chosen to establish this social and symbolic distance is *negro*, which is applied regardless of skin colour and instead reflects aesthetic preferences (Silba 2016; Vila and Silba 2012). It is clear that more than mere social constraints are at work when it comes to make music: subjective resources also come into play, forging a range of emotions.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I will focus on two points addressed herein. First, this article proposed to consider the connection between class and culture in its complexities, which represents a step beyond reductionist views that tend to interpret the connection somewhat mechanically or simply from a more ethnocentric perspective, which, as Semán notes, approaches cumbia from the perspective "of the same middle classes as the journalists and intellectuals" (2012: 152). My research approach yielded facts and arguments that have also been iterated in previous works (Silba 2008, 2011), namely, while cumbia has strong ties to the music industry and, more specifically, record labels, there are an enormous number of bands, concerts, appropriations and mobilizations of material, symbolic and human resources that move into action every weekend, yet because they do not appear in the mass media, they are not included in the constructed vision of the cumbia phenomenon from the very core, the heart of the city of Buenos Aires. The cultural richness of its artistic manifestations, their nuances, contradictions and enormous potential for liberation through dancing and enjoyment, led me to collect insurmountable data in the field.<sup>17</sup> Although social belonging of musicians imposed certain

17. My fieldwork was conducted from 2006 and 2009 at different cumbia dance clubs in Greater Buenos Aires. For more details, see my doctoral thesis (Silba 2011).

restrictions on their artistic projects, it did not keep them from generating culturally valuable products. Speaking more specifically of cumbia villera, whose musicians suffered the stigma associated with the lack of musical training, the testimonies gathered here reveal the difficulties faced by musicians when beginning their musical careers. Formal training in music often had to be combined with “hands-on” learning, as the musicians themselves referred to it, requiring enormous extra effort. Meanwhile, among youths, the possibility of accessing necessary equipment to produce and record cumbia music opened up a wide range of possibilities. When combined with forms of transmission available to them and their acquisition of cumbia music knowledge, they had opportunities for personal success not only at the artistic level, but also as a source of work.

Second, and in relation to the biased discourses against cumbia villera, both musicians and music producers equally experienced discrimination and reacted to it with a whole series of arguments. At times, they rejected those who voiced discriminatory discourses (“They’re ignorant”) or challenged them (“I’m always explaining to people that they’re not *negros* or *villos*... [that they’re] very talented artists, even geniuses”). When Belondi spoke of the beginnings of cumbia villera, it was interesting to note his emphasis on the music’s political value during the crisis at the turn of the century in Argentina. Belondi referred to a “testimonial cumbia” that always existed but now appeared in a more straightforward way, showing what’s actually going on to reveal a version of Argentina which many people would prefer to overlook entirely. In line with Alabarces and Rodríguez, such political value opens the cumbia up to interpretations that wager “on a single type of politicization [suffering from] a slight ethnocentrism and trusting in a modern, illustrious and prescriptive way of doing politics” (2008: 56). Instead, here I propose understanding cumbia as a series of advances and setbacks amongst different social sectors vying to accumulate power (Quintero Rivera 1999). Along the same lines, Semán affirms that “cumbia villera is protest music... it evidences the situations created by neoliberalism, drawing attention to them and questioning them through meaningful acts” (2012: 159). Finally, it is necessary to emphasize the happiness and enjoyment associated with the diverse practices surrounding this musical genre: in composing and playing cumbia, during live shows, artistic performances and interactions with audiences, and in the myriad ways cumbia listeners appropriate the music, incorporating it to their life experience from the context of their own lives, but also from a specific sociocultural context, which sets conditions and limits in everyday life, but also creates escape valves. And it offers tiny openings where meanings, spaces and knowledges can come to fruition through the pleasure and passion this music engenders.

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