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SOCIAL TRANSCULTURATION,
EPISTEMOLOGIES OF PURIFICATION
AND THE AURAL PUBLIC SPHERE
IN LATIN AMERICA

During the past decade, graduate programs in musicology and ethnomusicology have begun to consolidate in different parts of Latin America. This coincides with an increased interest in the topic of traditional and popular musics by students coming from diverse areas of the humanities and social sciences with the concomitant consolidation of different regional professional associations dedicated to studying the topic. This is undoubtedly a response to the intensification of the aural that has come about due to the technological, economic and structural transformation of the modes of circulation of sound in the past two decades. By intensification of the aural I mean the increasing importance of the sonic for a decentred modernity no longer exclusively (or even primarily) defined by the primacy of the lettered word nor by developmentalist models (Martín-Barbero, 2003) coupled with a ‘sonic turn’ — that is, the increasing significance of the acoustic as simultaneously a site for analysis, a medium for aesthetic engagement, and a model for theorization.

(Drobnick, 2004, 10)

This coincides with transformations in the structure of music knowledge under global conditions which are recasting the relations among and between Latin American scholars as well as between North and South.

One of the reasons for this intensification of the aural in Latin America is the revalorization, resignification and increased circulation of what historically have been considered ‘traditional’ musics as well as the rise of new forms of popular music. One witnesses, for example, the sharp rise of the world music industry and the closely allied global heritage industry (Travassos, 2006); the exacerbated production of different types of music in local studios that operate beyond the circuits of the official entertainment industry enacted through different styles and politics of self-production and circulation (Vianna, 2006; Ochoa, 2003); the transformation of the Latin music

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industry, particularly in the US and Spain in the midst of the reorganization of the economic and managerial structures of the industry between North and South (Yudice, 2003; Aparicio & Jáquez, 2003); the proliferation of new popular music genres that disrupt and redefine the mainstream popular sonic sphere; and the intensified use of what historically have been considered ‘traditional’ sounds in everything from electronic and avant garde music, to heritage revitalization movements. In this paper I wish to explore how practices of sonic recontextualization enacted by both folklorists and the music industry have been crucial to the constitution of an aural modernity. This is mediated simultaneously by the contradictory practices of epistemologies of purification—which seek to provincialize sounds in order to ascribe them a place in the modern ecumen and epistemologies of transculturation—which either enact or disrupt such practices of purification. Through this I wish to argue that the aural has been a sphere of crucial constitution of Latin America’s highly unequal modernity (García Canclini, 2002), one that is significant not only in the contemporary sonic turn but that played a role in defining the very idea of a Latin American lettered modernity.

**Sonic Recontextualization**

As stated by Feld, the history of academic sonic typologies and modes of approaching music as a study object are deeply embedded in the politics of the global circulation of sound (Feld, 2000). Sound technology has been used since the early days of comparative musicology to assist in the enterprise of musical documentation (Sterne, 2003; Brady, 1999) thus transforming the nature of the oral/aural divide and non-Western music’s archaeology. Moreover, the poetics and politics of musical recontextualization and schizophonia are essential to understanding genealogies of musical knowledge about non-Western music because one of the fundamental methodological steps in these studies is that of entextualization—that is, the act of framing the musical object to be studied through multiple modes of ‘capturing’ it. As such, the construction of knowledge about traditional musics shares with the recording industry the act of musical entextualization and recontextualization as fundamental practices.

One of the most challenging dimensions of the current intensification of musical recontextualization processes in Latin America has been the return of interests, discourses and practices of what historically have been considered traditional musics side by side and often in interaction with the rise of new popular music genres. In a paper entitled ‘Reflection on the ideological history of Latin American ethnomusicology’, Behague wrote, in 1991, that

> the basic problem [in Latin American ethnomusicology] has been and continues to be a lack of conceptual distinction between ‘musical folklore’ as thought and practised throughout Latin American ethnomusicology. (1991, p. 60)

He was echoing, perhaps, many Latin American musicians and scholars who since the 1960s had launched trenchant critiques on certain forms of folklorism that had
prevailed during the first half of the twentieth century and had played a crucial role in nationalistic cultural policies. However, one of the most striking features of the current recontextualization of sounds—which involves localizing global sounds as well as globalizing local ones—has been how many of the ideas originally tied to notions of musical folklore have returned under new guises and new activist pretexts to explain modes of signification of different types of music. One particularly salient mode of such signification involves the politics of belonging in which musical genres (traditional or popular) are deployed in order to articulate a) ties to place, b) communicative and communal ideals of spontaneity and affect that have been historically associated to an aesthetics of orality, and c) an ascribed sense of deeply felt identification. This intensification of the aural has thus also yielded a revitalization and resignification of place-based musical theories that are often constituted through ideologies originally associated with musical folklore, even when they are enacted in the name of what would be considered non-folkloric musics.

Simultaneously, we have an increasing use of certain popular musics, which historically have not been tied to place-based politics, serving as a crucial sonic agenda for the constitution of musical practices that often defy notions of musical belonging, heritage or resistance. Musics that are neither 'youth music' nor 'folk', nor easily tied to either a social movement or a revolutionary aesthetic, but whose technological mediations, forms of constructing identification and regional localizations defy, at least in their initial stages of consolidation, easy musical typologies or associations—such is the case with genres such as Brazilian *tecnobrega*, Argentinean *cumbia villera*, *nacrocóndidos*, Peruvian *chicha*, or Brazilian *brega* (Araújo, 1998; Cragnolini, 2005; Vianna, 2006; Simonnet, 2001). These types of music often lie outside the parameters of canonic validation—neither heritage nor youth nor revolutionary aesthetics—and are often likened to ideologies of bad taste and, by association, to that which is socially considered low class and vulgar. But simultaneously, their imbrication with either dystopian imaginations that reveal the extremes of contemporary Latin America's societal exclusions (Cragnolini, 2005), as well as with illegal transnational economies (in their symbolic celebration or economic association with narcotruffle for example), points to what Martín-Barbero calls the uncase of modernity (*los malestares de la modernidad*) (2003). Thus, as discourses about belonging are reenacted in the multiple realms of the heritage industry, music itself becomes more about 'increasingly complicated pluralities and uneven experiences' (Feld, 2000, p. 146). This dispersal of the aural into different modalities signifies, in Latin America, not a postmodern fragmentation but rather a rearticulation of the plurality characteristic of decentralizing a long history of a modernity plagued by silencing, inequalities and disencounters (Martín-Barbero, 2003).

The recontextualization of musics from Latin America in different arenas, or the globalization of local sounds, is, of course, nothing new to the region. One could, in fact, construct a history of the signification of Latin American aurality by attending to the particularities of the multiple historical moments in which local sounds have been recontextualized and resignified. This has been constitutive of what Thomas Turino has identified as a history of cosmopolitan musical nationalisms in the region since the early nineteenth century (Turino, 2003). Given that today the intensified circulation of what historically have been considered local musics everywhere is now quite
a crucial role in the features of the musical sounds as aurally tied to musical genres and musical cultures. The sound of the instruments used in these genres has been newly constructed and understood across different contexts, and the way these new sounds are used in musical practice has become increasingly standard in and across different genres, then the very idea of musical hybridity as an exceptional recourse becomes questionable. Rather, we need to consider a genealogy of histories of recontextualization that involves different forms of production of oral textualities (Goodman, 2002) as constitutive of aural modernity. From this vantage point, the history of twentieth-century aurality in Latin America can be seen (or heard) as one of constant processes of recontextualization—of differential historical schizophrenic moments one could say—done through different politics and aesthetics of sonic transformation and mixing—from the avant garde to different forms of the popular, from the mainstream to the countercultural. Here, hybridity appears as a symptom of high modernity (if by hybridity we mean intergeneric relations that were historically non-existing as the term tends to be used in popular music studies). Rather, we have a reiterative process of entextualization and recontextualization that was intensified at the moment of the invention of sound reproduction in the late nineteenth century, through which music became a crucial feature of twentieth-century modernities (Erlmann, 1999; Turino, 2000).

What is fascinating to me, then, is precisely the opposite of the oft-mentioned late twentieth century sonic hybridities—that processes of sonic recontextualization, of musical schizophrenia and sonic disaggregation and reconfiguration seem to be seen, again and again, as a profound innovation, as going against the grain, as a practice deeply based in the idea of discovering something new for the first time, each time they are enacted, even when following previously set models. Thus, what are historically considered as local types of music (and the sounds associated with it) are not only apparently dying out because of their association to folklore and/or to the ever-vanishing natives (Bauman & Briggs, 2003). By that very same token they are always readily available for (re)discovery and thus for the reconstitution of musics, knowing of existent paradigms that are based on them. But today this happens not only with musics associated to what has been historically named as folklore. It happens with all musics that in practice are used to establish links with place and history as a primary means of musical identification and belonging even when they are perceived primarily as mass-mediated or transnational musics (Samuels, 2004). The practice of re-localizing and re-temporalizing music then, seems to provide an inexhaustible fountain of musical youth or newness to be discovered anew in expediencies into different forms of sonic localizations (entextualizations, recontextualizations, replications) by each generation.

These different moments and processes of musical recontextualization are always accompanied by an intense debate about the meaning of sonic localism and sonic temporality and its place in Latin American modernity, in other words, they are constitutive of an aural public sphere, or more poetically, and following Angel Rama, of Latin America as an aural region. In his book The Lettered City, Rama argued for the role of control over the written word as crucial to the constitution of Latin American forms of administration and power. He saw the written word, concentrated in the cities where lettered elites reside, as constitutive of a highly unequal public sphere where only a minority had access to its communicative constitution (Rama,
2002[1984]). In speaking about Latin America as an aural region, I argue that under the contemporary processes of social globalization and regionalization coupled with the transformations in the technologies of sound, the public sphere is increasingly mediated by the aural. These processes are, if not subverting, at least displacing the relation between the sonic and the lettered word. The public sphere is being redefined to include forms of participation which are not channeled by the forms of debate or participation historically recognized as such by the official polity (Martín-Barbero, 2001; Winocur, 2002). Here the technological enhancement of the aurality of the media that has occurred with digitalization plays a crucial role in recasting the very idea of participation (Winocur, 2002; Vianna, 2006). The intermediality of the sonic sphere—from face-to-face communication to radio, cinema and television, to the self-production of recordings to internet and cell phone communication—becomes an increasingly privileged site of constitution of a (contented) public sphere. I emphasize the aural as opposed to the audiovisual (highlighted by Martín-Barbero) because the aural's intense intermediality makes it constitutive also of lettered and face-to-face communications which signal different types of mediations in the multitemporal imaginaries of postcolonial modernities. Moreover, this shift from the lettered city to the aural region also involves a recognition of the role of Latin American aural globalizations as crucial to the constitution of the region's audiovisualities in a global context, a displacement of the lettered city as that which embodies the region's sign of particularity proffered in the time of the literary boom (Franco, 2002). This is not so much an issue of the sonic replacing the lettered, as a move from the gaze to listening as a locus of analysis and political struggle (Drobnick, 2004).

What the recent processes of musical recontextualization show us, then, is not so much a new historical phase of musical recontextualization or yet other modes of musical hybridization—which they are, of course—but rather a displacement in the power of significantation and mediation of the aural in the constitution of Latin America's public sphere. High modernity here appears as profoundly imbedded by the sonic as an increasingly conscious and manipulable sphere of communicability. The rise of the sonic is profoundly tied to the displacement of ideologies of mestizaje that were crucial to the nation-building phase in the early twentieth century. It is also tied to the rise of diversity as a crucial site of political constitution (Gros, 2000) as well as to the technological transformations that have highlighted the aural's intermediality—the way it transverses and constitutes multiple sites of communication, even those primarily perceived as visual such as cinema and television (Chion, 1994[1990]).

This moment of intense paradoxical recontextualization of sounds, its relation to the structuring of knowledge about music and the rise of the aural as a theoretical analytical category as crucial to high modernity, can no longer be explained by recourses tied to notions of retraditionalization (such as revivals) or, on the opposite side, to the uses of the idea of hybridity as a synonym for musical fusion. It actually necessitates a fundamental reconceptualization on the role of the temporal and spatial dimensions of the sonic and their existential and epistemological significance under the changing technological and social conditions of a globalized world. Today it has become normative that the circulation and marketing of musical genres historically considered under the aegis of folklore or intangible heritages occurs side by side and/or is interspersed with what historically has been considered

For example,
mass music, classical music of the Western world and new forms of sonic codification and typologies (ambient, electronic, new age, new genres, etc.) through shared modes of technological processing of sounds.\(^6\)

To comprehend this transformation it is crucial to try to understand the patterns of the structure of knowledge on traditional and popular music in Latin America throughout the twentieth century as a crucial sphere of significations of the sonic—one that mediates the lettered city and the aural region and, as such, pre-figures many of the issues that concern Latin Americans in a sonically imbued modernity. The search for ethnomusicological studies and alternative forms of disciplinary formation has been an interest of postmodern metropolitan ethnomusicology. The question is how does one frame such epistemological outreach when it is constructed as a question formulated from the metropolis to the periphery? Within a postcolonial critique, the use of the word ‘ethnomusicology’ when looking at peripheral traditional and popular music studies has the potential of enacting an erasure of the diversity of origins and histories of such studies, by placing the North American (or German) lineage as an originary practice from which the others developed. In other words, it assumes disciplinary practices described in terms of a metropole matrix (Restrepo & Escobar, 2005, p. 115) that generates an ‘asymmetrical ignorance’ because it tends to validate traditional and popular music studies only when they take the form of metropolitan disciplinary practice. I would like to argue, rather, that the epistemological structure of studies of traditional and popular musics in Latin America, despite clear trajectories that can be identified as ethnomusicological, cannot be understood adequately within this frame. Instead, the determining epistemological relation of studies in traditional and popular musics in the region occurs, I would propose here, between cultural policy, the multiple methodologies used to study traditional and popular musics and dispersed textualities embodied in different practices of writing about music—from journalism, to fiction, to written compositions, to formal academic forms of writing. This is why I prefer to use the term ‘studies of traditional and popular music’ and not the word ethnomusicology. In terms of cultural policy, two elements are crucial: the relationship between folkloristics and ethnomusicology, in other words between epistemologies of purification and traditional and popular music studies, on the one hand, and the rise of the music industry, on the other.

**Folklore and the Aural Public Sphere in the Era of Nationalism**

Crucial to the constitution of what I am calling the aural public sphere was the emergence of folklore studies in Latin America which arose from the 1880s/1920s and lasted to the late 1970s.\(^7\) But the practice of folkloristics itself was a highly heterogeneous one (de Carvalho, 1979–80). Jose Jorge de Carvalho distinguishes between types of folklore studies in Latin America on the basis of

the concrete sphere of knowledges collected by them and the type of interpretation that they search with their works and the discipline or area of intellectual work in which they are inserted, *in case it is possible to determine that.* (p. 67, my italics)
Notice, again, the very dispersal and the impossibility to determine a typical figure that embodies the intellectual involved in traditional and popular music studies. De Carvalho groups the types of studies into descriptive studies, formalist studies (the category where formal musical analysis is most present), studies of the history of culture and sociological and anthropological studies. But despite the diversity of their writings and labour, we must ask why are these writers ascribed to the area of folkloristics, if not necessarily as a discipline, at least as a practice? That is, what do they share? De Carvalho mentions scholars such as Celso Lara, Augusto Raúl Cortazar, Luis de Cámara Cascudo, Dario Guevara, Manuel Danneman, Mario de Andrade, Oncida Olvarenga, among others. One could, of course, expand this list. But the point here is not to be exhaustive but rather to explore the significance of the types of articulations and simultaneity of practices for a general understanding of the role of epistemologies of purification in constituting the aural public sphere.

These scholars shared an interest in identifying and visualizing local musics as part of a project of valorization of sonic localism that was crucial to nationalist postcolonial projects. In all cases this involved some sort of practice of recognizing and/or collecting sonic items. How this was done differed from one individual to another, according, on the one hand, to their training—that is, according to whether they were anthropologists, musicologists, composers, writers or simply defined themselves primarily as folklorists—or according to whether music was a central or secondary interest in their general intellectual pursuits. Sometimes these practices were articulated into broader nationalist projects but often remained only of regional significance (Vilhena, 1997). In most cases, folkloristics made part of a broader disciplinary or creative practice that gave its practitioners their main insertion into public space, even when their work as folklorists became their bread winning labour in certain periods of their lives. Mario de Andrade, Alejo Carpentier and Manuel Zapata Olivella are much better known as fiction writers; Fernando Ortiz as an anthropologist; Carlos Vega and Isabel Aretz are probably better described as ethnomusicologists or musicologists. We also find many composers who also collected folklore and were deeply embedded in its politics—Carpentier himself, Heitor Villa-Lobos in Brazil and Carlos Chavez in Mexico to name the obvious.

Many of these intellectuals not only documented and wrote about local musics, many of them also held public posts—temporary or of longer duration—in folklore institutes, radio stations, music studios, and cultural departments in official ministries, in which positions their role was to mobilize folklore for specific political and aesthetic ends within early twentieth century processes of nationalization. For example, Alejo Carpentier worked in radio for much of his life, promoted several son groups in Cuba and abroad and was later involved as an official representative of the Castro government in Venezuela (Brennan, 2001). Mario de Andrade founded the folkloric institutes of Brazil, enacted expeditions of recording that are still a model of musical documentation that produces discussion and debate (Travassos, 1997). Delia Zapata Olivella created the national folklore ballet of Colombia and, with her brother Manuel, who also made radio programs and was a fiction writer, organized some of the first tours of Colombian Caribbean folk musicians to Europe and Russia in the 1950s. Sometimes these activities did not even involve a paid job or public recognition and they were done as a practice of engagement with sonic localism for nationalistic purposes.
Theirs was a direct intervention in cultural policy or in what George Yudice has called ‘the expediency of culture’, namely, the usage of culture for political ends (Yudice, 2003). This ‘undisciplined practice’ complicated any clear politico-epistemological distinction between the intellectual as a privileged figure in the constitution of a cultural public sphere or, to the contrary, as a subaltern figure whose possibilities of articulation into broad nationalistic agendas were often fragmentary (Vilhena, 1997; Boyer & Lomnitz, 2005; de Carvalho, 1979–80). In other words, their practice of folkloristics was deeply embedded in a politics of intervention that sought to reorganize the practices and reification of the sonic but this did not necessarily imply a privileged location as an intellectual in the public sphere.

Underlying these practices was a rather fragile—perhaps even non-existent—disciplinary unity. Instead, all these individuals were part of a network of relations that included composers, writers, ethnographers, folklorists and public personnel which actually acted as their main ‘cohort’. In other words, what fed into their disciplinary and creative work was not a specific ‘department’ or even a university, despite repeated concerted efforts of institutionalization or associative mobilization. This meant that many individuals worked in isolation, in projects that were constantly in need of being restructured due to lack of institutional emplacement and often through very lonely endeavours—friendship did not solve the economic and professional needs that would have been provided by institutionalization. The relations of mediation between and across these networks of relation were thus very different from one individual to another or even from one period of a person’s life (where he or she might have a temporary post for example) to another. Whether such interventions were articulated into a broader public sphere or remained as isolated efforts then depended on a variety of factors—from institutional relations, types of mediations, personal relations to populist and nationalistic politics.

Several of these scholars studying local musics were engaged in creative activities—musical composition, writing of novels or poetry, or writing a literally imbued ethnography—which were profoundly informed by their folklore studies or their personal relations to the practitioners of these musics (Vianna, 2002[1995]; Coronil, 1995). What we have then is a dispersal of the folkloric function of recognition of local sounds and of aurality into multiple textual practices—that of the avant garde composer and his or her œuvre, the anthropologist and his or her ethnography, or the writer and his or her text (novel, poetry, essay), the person engaged in the composition of popular music and his or her songs. The transformation of sound into verbal and lettered significance occurs, then, not only through the practices of codification of the sonic in academic texts but also through the place of the aural in defining the significance of the lettered: epistemologies of purification are meant to inform not only folkloristics and the rise of the music industry but also vanguard aesthetic practices and thus act as a resource, and were thus constitutive of a lettered modernity.

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local non-Western musics as valid—all other musical practices have historically been seen as formally less sophisticated than Western art music and rejected as a conservatory study object which is one of the reasons why local music studies are dispersed into other arenas (Behague, 1991). Thus while Western art music was meant to enact high art, folk and popular music were meant to expedite the local: in folklore texts, in vanguard creativity, in cultural policy. In other words, Yudice’s expediency of culture, which he identifies as a new episteme in today’s art world (albeit one with historical underpinnings), has actually been a defining quality of the aurality that represents sonic locality since the inception of its identification.

We have then, a multi-layered process of practices of musical entextualization and recontextualization, what I am calling sonic transculturation. This involves the collection of sounds, the description of sounds into multiple disciplines, the cultural practices through which these sounds are embedded into politics of recontextualization and the creative textualities and entextualizations into which these sounds are embedded. By sonic transculturation I mean a ‘general restructuring’ (Rama, 1982, p. 39) of the practices, modes of signification and circulation of the sonic. This ‘general restructuring’ rearticulates the relation between the local, the national and the global through multiple practices that imbue sounds with notions of place-based originality and representativeness in an intensely transnational sphere. The aural public sphere, Latin America as an aural region, is thus constituted by the mediations and (dis)junctures between these different practices enacted by the sonic transculturators—that is, all of those involved in this reorganization whether as musicians, intellectuals, or figures that move between different capacities. This often involved the immersion of the individuals who practised this separability into contradictory practices of recontextualization demanded by their simultaneous investment in cultural policy, avant garde creativity, the media, the nationalistic agendas of folkloristics and in the different types of mediations and articulations enacted through these different investments. Thus musical nationalist cosmopolitanism is a project fraught with the contradictions of mediating between the local and the metropolis (Turino, 2000; 2003). What does this say of the political significance and inscription of the intellectuals that participated in these complex networks and of the significance of epistemologies of purification in postcolonial contexts? What does it tell us about the ways in which many of the ideas associated with local musics are being recast and resignified in today’s intensified aural recontextualizations?

**Sonic Transculturation and Genealogies of Aurality**

Luis Rodolfo Vilhena writes that it is a loss to the social sciences that the work of folklorists in Brazil during the early twentieth century was excluded from the consolidation of social sciences and thus became a neglected disciplinary history (1997). Likewise, Isabel Aretz herself wrote that ‘ethnomusicology is still not sufficiently important among us and it seems it does not fit in a general history of culture...’ (1991, p. 7). The study of traditional and popular musics, as a discipline, seems to belong nowhere and yet the ideas tied to epistemologies of sonic purification are tremendously strong and persistent in several fields—an issue easily seen in the
resignification of the parameters of folkloristics under the new terminologies of traditional popular culture and intangible heritage in the 1960s and in the 1990s respectively. As such, it is simultaneously a subaltern discipline and quite a powerful discursive formation that permeates different disciplinary fields as well as different practices that went into rendering sonic localism into an autonomous sphere. I would like to suggest that the study of traditional musics, rather than a discipline, was a dispersed epistemology of sonic purification constitutive of what Silviano Santiago calls the Latin American ‘in-between’ (2001) in which the politics and poetics of local sounds are differentially embedded in multiple practices and disciplines that are not easily ascribable to a single space. The in-between here refers both to Latin American sonic transculturators’ relation to a metropolitan centre that provides the model for avant garde aesthetics and for disciplinary constructions yet one that needs to be transcended in order to achieve differentiation, as well as to the need to reconfigure the place of the local through heterogeneous practices of entextualization and recontextualization.

What becomes extremely intriguing about these intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century is their paradoxical and contradictory relation to the local. While their creative writing or compositional practices place them squarely in the vanguardist, modernist project, establishing ruptures with previous nineteenth century modes of conceptualizing artistic vanguards and local culture in order to construct regionally specific modernisms and modernities, their descriptions of local music and its role in the nation-state often reclaim a status of perpetuation for the folkloric text in its sameness—i.e. in what has been described (or is entextualized and described by them) as its pure form (Travassos, 1997). The paradox enacted depends on a division of sonic labour: while creative transculturation is a practice that can be embodied by certain figures (avant garde composers, folklorists, musicians of the popular identified as valid, and writers) it depends on others whose proper place is to represent ‘the local’ without deviating from it. But this division is not a division between the ‘traditional’ sounds and ‘popular’ ones. For the former cohort, it is absolutely proper not only to document these groups as folklore but also to intervene in popularizing them or in using them as a resource for avant garde creativity. Thus, part of their effort was to make them visible in Paris, New York and at home as an iconic sign of a differential modernity, the ‘fetishization of local sounds’ (Stokes, 2004) upon which the national and transnational recognition of the region’s aural differential modernity is still largely based. These scholars thus often established an ellipse between the folkloric and the popular which is controversial in Latin America until today: we find a hierarchical differentiation between what are considered proper ‘folkloric’ sounds versus ‘popular’ sounds, yet, often, the same genres and musicians are used to simultaneously embody the folkloric and the popular, by the very fact of being inserted into the commercial and representational circuits that popularize them as well as lead them into folkloric canonization.

Paradoxically, many of these sonic transculturators wrote critiques against the ‘commercialization’ of folk music, while being active in their popularization (Brennan, 2001; Sandroni, 2004; Wade, 2000; Ochoa, 2003). These critiques, of course, changed in form and signification from one person to another and from one historical period to another, but they do identify a discursive field of sonic
exclusion. They regard as improper the transformation of these sounds in such a way that they disrupt the work of purification of the local—generally by people from the music industry with no link to these nationalizing projects or by the ‘folk’ themselves. Commercialization here refers to the process of transforming local sounds in such a way that they neither act as a resource for the avant garde, nor an aesthetics for the local, nor an aesthetics of the popular that re-presents the local, but rather an aesthetics that ruptures the sonic fetishization of the local and thus links these commercialized music to ‘bad taste’ and to ‘vulgarity’. That is, stylistic and sonic practices that defy certain notions of the aural public sphere disrupting its constitution as a Bourdieuan sphere of distinction and thus upsetting the project of racial, class and ethnic exclusions and hierarchies constitutive of the project of Enlightened modernity. These exclusions and hierarchies coupled with the aforementioned in-betweenness is what makes Latin American postcolonial sonic modernity a highly unequal one. Sonic transculturation, to be canonically valid, then, can only be enacted by certain figures and through certain musical procedures that assure a ‘proper’ aesthetics. The periphery, in this case, is defined not so much by the idealized folkloric, but by the transculturations that are considered ‘vulgar’. Exclusions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class are often mediated by this term: the binary opposition that underlies these exclusions is not between the traditional and the popular but rather between transculturations epistemologically validated through practices of purification and those that are not.

Yet the simultaneity of contradictory processes of aural separability disrupt the force of this binary as the only possibility for a postcolonial sonic modernity making it a highly embattled project. The historical paradox is that these musics often get validated once their popularization is mediated by different values and mediations of canonization, including the canonization of different modes of commercialization. This is why, in Latin America, the origins of popular music are often described as initially rejected and often later embraced by cultural or entertainment mediators and elites. Tango, capoeira, son, vallenato, samba, among others—and their practitioners, of course—were all considered vulgar before their canonic validation. Once they became national symbols or valued by the entertainment industry then the politics of relation between aesthetic inclusion (of previously excluded music due to racial, class, sexual or ethnic politics) and social inclusion became more complicated. Since the intellectual figures that enacted these projects were themselves contradictory and differentially emplaced in their possibilities of mediation and articulation of their own political agendas, it was impossible to determine these mediators solely as cultural elite figures. In some cases they clearly were, but in other cases the politics of mediation and disjuncture between fields of exclusion and participation were highly diverse from one figure to another. What we have then is a highly contested field characterized by multiple mediations in which the politics of sonic validation and/or exclusion are articulated in contradictory ways in an embattled sonic modernity. Sonic localism then appears as a highly contested sphere.

A question emerges: is the act of epistemological purification of sounds one that already contains the only political means of interpreting and recontextualizing those sounds? That is, can it only be used to construct social inequality as suggested by
Bauman and Briggs? I would suggest rather that it is the opposite: the act of purification of the sonic is actually wrought with innumerable possibilities of political articulation and interpretation often beyond and above those that entextualize the sonic object itself. The intense discussion on ideas about folklore and popular musics in the 1960s and 1970s which yielded the rise of such terminologies as traditional popular music to replace the unwanted ideological and nationalistic implications of folkloristics and the rise of the notion of intangible heritage in the 1990s to replace the exclusions of the 1960s both signify the contested political nature of these practices; yet they signify their simultaneous re-enactment under differential politics. The invisibilization produced by the politics of purification is re-enacted not only for the sake of creating social inequality but also by social movements and others whose intention it is precisely to contest those inequalities. That is why, as Steven Feld has shown us in the field of world music, this process often is wrought with divisive politics: if for some world music evokes a celebratory politics of diversity and recognizability, for others it evokes the contested politics of the musical market in a capitalist world where recognition is increasingly mediated by the politics of neoliberalism. That is why, also, as academics deconstruct the history of sonic inequalities imbued in the history of folkloristics and popular music genres in Latin America, the members of social movements often take these same representations and use them for expediting a sonic politics of recognition and mediation.

But more than that, once a musical object is separated from its original context it enters a realm of symbolic interpretation that can be highly ambiguous. The work of anthropologists Oshinski Tierney on the militarization of Japanese aesthetics during the Second World War and of David Samuels on the use of country music in the San Carlos Apache reservation in Arizona has made us aware that once decontextualized, music, as a particularly marked and heightened poetic field, is easily amenable to multiple modes of indexical and iconic interpretations that imbue it with different semantic content. Thus one and the same sound or musical genre can come to mean or be used in very different ways, not only in different contexts but often in the same contexts by different groups of people and individuals. An issue highlighted by the intense intermediality of the sonic and by music as an item easily amenable to multiple processes of separation and recontextualization.

I want to propose that what has become reified in Latin America is not so much a discipline as a type of articulation between (i) practices and discourses of recontextualization of local musics—what Bauman and Briggs named epistemologies of purification; and (ii) practices and discourses of sonic transculturation—what, following Ortíz and Rama I will call epistemologies of transculturation, that is epistemologies that validate the hybrid and are located in the in-between as a sphere of intervention. Both of these feed into each other and constitute each other in contradictory and complex ways. Thus, sonic modernity is always presented as an unfinished project because the very existence of the colonial/modern and of the traditional/modern is precisely based on the cyclical relations of these articulations (Bauman & Briggs, 2003). Hybridity in this sense is less a transformation of tradition—a statement to enter or leave modernity to use García Canclini’s (1989) words—that it is a reification, through multiple practices of transculturation, of the traditional/modern in order to construct it as permanently inexhaustible. And in the
contested sites of unequal modernities, such articulations tend to be complexly
interwoven due to the dispersal of the mediators of these articulations into different
types of labour, institutional insertion, types of intervention and modes of textual
expression. Rather than a binary division between tradition and modernity, or
thinking of tradition as a backdrop for modernity, what we hear here is multiple
mediations enacting a constant relation between sonic transculturation and
purification. And what the simultaneity of multiple forms of recontextualization does
(that of the industry, that of intellectuals, that of social and artistic movements) is
complicate the erasure enacted through practices of purification and their canonic
validity. Furthermore, this wreaks havoc in the colonial constitution of the idea of an
Enlightened modernity as the dominant version of modernity. Aurality is thus a
crucial site of constitution of the disencounters of modernities (Ramos, 1989) and
the struggle between Enlightened and modernities otherwise is frequently a struggle
between a lettered model of modernity that provincializes the aural and an aural
otherwise in which ethnic heritages, class differences, sexual and gender inequalities
become contested sites of sonic intervention and interpretation. Thus, the circulation
of ‘traditional’ sounds under new types of codification—from folklore to the
traditional popular to intangible heritage—is a permanent feature of a modernity
that by its very practices of invisibilization is constituted as in permanent need of
reinvention.

The current recasting of the study of traditional and popular musics in the South
undoubtedly takes place under the shadow of ‘dominant’ ethnomusicologies. Paraphrasing Restrepo and Escobar, by dominant ethnomusicologies I mean

the discursive formations and institutional practices that have been
associated with the normalization of anthropology [in this case
ethnomusicology] under academic modalities chiefly in

the United States, Britain and France. Dominant ethnomusicologies

include the diverse processes of professionalization and institutionalization
that accompanied the consolidation of disciplinary canons and
subjectivities, and through which anthropologists [ethnomusicologists]
recognize themselves and are recognized by others as such. (Restrepo &
Escobar 2005, p. 103)

If the exploration of musical knowledges otherwise is to have political significance in
Latin America, then it entails listening to the ways in which this genealogical history
points simultaneously to possibilities of futurity and to histories of exclusion that can
easily be rearticulated. Likewise, if the project of deprovincializing ethnomusicological
knowledge in the North is to have any significance, then it involves less the search for
an essence in other forms of similar disciplinary structures than for practices and
relations in a heterogeneous epistemological field, a task that is ever more urgent as
the North American academy’s power to articulate itself as a centre of information,
academic standardization and an axis of canonic validation becomes ever more
pervasive (Richard, 2001).
Notes

1 For example, the Latin American branch of the International Association for the Studies of Traditional and Popular Music began in August 2000, and the Brazilian Association for Ethnomusicology began in 2001.

2 For example, many of the sounds being used today by young musicians in Buenos Aires, Bogotá or Rio de Janeiro, were brought to national and international attention in the processes of folklorization and popularization that began in the 1920s and lasted until the 1970s and that gave rise to such national and popular music as Brazilian samba, Argentine tango, Cuban son, Colombian cumbia or Mexican corrido. Also, during the 1960s and 1970s, left-wing musical movements, such as the New Song Movement in Spanish speaking Latin America and Caribbean, and Tropicália and MPB in Brazil redefined the notions of folklorization that had been prevalent until then, enacting a new relation between the local and the metropolitan and between musical politics, musical knowledge and sonic commercialization. Also during that period genres such as salsa and reggae were consolidated through and by transnational and diasporic relations. And currently, different ethnic and class based social movements involved with both transnational popular music and local heritages, as well as urban and regional based musicians that creolize transnational and local music, are recasting this relation under new guises.

3 Even when a process of traditonalization is enacted—minimizing processes of hybridity to keep to an idea of inherited tradition, such a choice is consciously made (see de Carvalho, 1979–80) thus making generic ascription and heritage a discursive formation in permanent negotiation.

4 It is no accident that this comes about with a radical reorganization of ‘the music industry’ or the modes of circulation and marketing of sounds. This bears significance not only regarding issues of ‘piracy’, but rather excess it in the sense that unofficial and self-organized forms of circulation of sound prevail today in many regions of the world—from the selling of self produced CDs through networks of aesthetic belonging (Ochoa, 2003) to the use of instant duplication made available by digital sonic technology to circulate musical events as sonic artefacts (Vianna, 2002[1995]), to the reinterpretation of the radio as a crucial site for the formation of a diverse musical heritage (Samuels, 2004).

5 I am not implying here that folklore studies do not continue but rather that their presence in the public sphere has been transformed by the rise of social movements, NGOs and the new discourses and politics on intangible heritage adopted and/or promoted by UNESCO and the nation-states.

6 What we have here is quite a long tradition in which practices of transculturation and purification enact a different type of disciplinary boundary than the one that exists in the metropolitan regions that clearly distinguishes between musicology and ethnomusicology as separate disciplinary histories. Thus, the idea that people normally trained to privilege Western classical music, engage with ‘other’ musics does not come, necessarily from the break up of the canon generated by the influence of cultural studies and poststructuralism.

7 See García Canclini (2002) for a similar critique of the transformation of the meaning and usages of culture today.

8 For example, the Associação Brasileira de Etnomusicologia was created after the ICTM congress in Rio de Janeiro and the Latin American IASPM is related to the international IASPM, of British based origins. I do not mean to imply that these associations would not have emerged without this presence thus condemning the Latin American academy to a mimetic unoriginality. Rather, what I wish to point out is that the emergence of these transformations takes place at the unequal intersection of the local and the global and not as isolated gestures.
References


