

Mexican Sonideros: alternative bodies on streets¹

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ABSTRACT: *Mexican Sonideros are sound systems that organize popular dances in the poor neighborhoods of Mexico City. They also operate in other Mexican cities and parts of the USA, where many Mexican immigrants live and work. In some aspects, they are very similar to other Latin-American sound systems such as Brazilian Tecnobrega and Funk Carioca, and Colombian Picoterros. However, Mexican Sonideros have some features that make them quite unique.*

Mexican Sonideros stand out for DJ performance: The DJ constantly talks over the music, adjust its speed and adds sounds effects that contribute to make a bridge between tradition and modernity. Their repertoire includes Cuban music hits of the forties, salsa and cumbia, from the classic to these days. One of the most unique elements is the new bodily practice introduced by dancers. The common gender markers of this kind of music disappears and new corporalities emerge in the bosom of gay and transvestite community.

KEYWORDS: *Mexican sonideros, music, urban space, embodiment, queer culture.*

INTRODUCTION

Mexican Sonideros are sound systems that organize popular dances in the poor neighborhoods of Mexico City. They also operate in other Mexican cities and parts of the USA where many Mexican immigrants live and work. In some aspects, they are very similar to other Latin-American sound systems such as the *Tecnobrega* or the *Funk Carioca* of Brazil or the *Picoterros* of Colombia.

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However, they are quite unique. For instance, the DJ's performance is singular because constantly talk over the music. They don't resort to *turntablism*. Instead they intervene in the recordings by adding voices or sound logos that work as a personal "trade mark", or cosmic and futuristic sounds, or sometimes traditional sounds. They also alter the speed and volume of the music and the pitch of their own voices. The dances are held in ballrooms or squares but mostly they happen on the street, in the public space. In this case, traffic is closed with or without the permission of the authorities.

American sonideros are specialized in Caribbean dance music like salsa and cumbia. The songs are not just the current hits or the tunes played on commercial radio. Actually, the range goes from Cuban music from the 40s to recent cumbia songs composed specially for them by bands from numerous Latin-American countries. The dance styles of the participants are striking. They manage to introduce body practices that challenge the usual gender stereotypes present in Caribbean music. They also question the deep-rooted tradition of homophobia and heteronomy present in their culture. Furthermore, the business model that accompanies this practice has had a strong impact on the music industry. Alternative ways of distribution surfaced and audiences whose needs were not satisfied by the traditional industry were cared for. For these and many more reasons, the Sonideros contributed to create powerful social dynamics and shared meanings for a wide ill-treated social segment.

The Colombian scholar Darío Blanco claims that the Sonideros are "heirs, upgraders and transformers" of a "deep tradition of collective rituals" and that they are "essential actors in the resistance and identity of popular culture". According to him, the rituals in which they participate are from "pre-modern origin" and oppose the modernizing tendency of globalization (Blanco, 2012, p. 54). According to the American scholar Cathy Raglan, who studied the role of sonideros dances within the Mexican population of the US, these events present an "idiosyncratic fusion of tradition and modernity, in which the roots-oriented sounds of a rural vallenato-style cumbia are combined with the sonidero's space-age sound effects" (Ragland, 2003, p. 350).

In the present work, I shall explore another level of interpretation of the sonidero practices that relates specifically to Mexico City. That scene presents distinctive characteristics which make it different from the rest of the cities of Mexico and the U.S. Sonidero dances may be, willing or unwillingly, a means to resist the cultural homogenization that results from globalization. In my understanding, however, they are not a means to reject modernization altogether. Nor do they reject some forms of cultural trans-territoriality. On the contrary, I propose that they are coming up with their own ways to create a dialogue between tradition and modernity, as well as their own process of cultural assimilation and expansion. However, the latter is limited because their needs are not addressed within broad cultural and economic policies. Therefore, I believe

that more than the locus where fusion between modernity and tradition occurs, sonidero parties conform the space where an unresolved negotiation is taking place; where strong identity-related tensions between the past, the present and the future settle their differences and find agreements, at times fleeting, but strongly rooted in the embodied and emotional experience.

SONIDEROS: BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY TECHNOLOGY

When the Mexican Sonideros play their performance in the streets, a complex cultural scenario takes place that can be understood as dialogues between different cultural universes. The first and perhaps the most important dialogue is between tradition and modernity technology.

One of the clearest dialogues between tradition and modernity in Sonideros is their relationship between the technology they have and the actual use that they made of it. This is obvious in the way the DJ's host the party. The Sonideros intervene constantly in the music; they insert very sophisticated trademark sound logos and use very special aesthetics. In some cases, like with *sonido Pancho*, the sound marks a change between modern cosmic sounds and traditional soundscape, like the Mariachi cry. Sometimes the DJ's intervenes by singing the chorus, or by singing information to the rhythm of the music, tampering with the stereo or by pumping up the volume, and so on. Technology is what allows them to alter the voice through filters, to make an echo or to alter the pitch, among others. The voice is deep, grandiose and it booms throughout the street as if it came from another dimension. Cathy Ragland explained that all this performance serves to give the sonidero DJ an aura of authenticity. They tirelessly assert the superiority of their music and of their set (Ragland, 2003). But mostly, this all gives them an aura of power: the voice is superhuman and they brag about their sound system, the watts and decibels generated. All this rubs on the public who feels empowered by the sonidero's ability to close the street for his personal use, the public feels the power of enjoying a kind of music that is not always available on the traditional media, the power to partake in body expressions that deviate from the norm.

This is patent in the opening of the *tokines* (the gigs). They are bombastic, flashy and even arrogant. Lights are involved, music and advanced sound systems upgraded to the latest international tendencies. However, this has nothing to do with the dances that take place later in the main show: dances in traditional way.

Postcolonial Studies talk of *mimicry* when a dominated population adopts the cultural practices of the dominant elite while still, consciously or unconsciously, maintaining some of its practices (Bhabha, 1994). Therefore, mimicry allows for an ironical deconstruction of the power of the colonizer. This is what happens constantly with technology. The different *Latin-American Sound Systems* in fact frequently questioning the *white* and *English labeled* technology

while using it in a very flamboyant manner. The result is surprising: solemn but with a touch of irony. The Mexican Sonidero DJ's are a sample of it²

GREETINGS AS DIALOGUES BETWEEN DJ'S AND AUDIENCES

One of the most distinctive features of the sonidero is the constant shout-outs. The audience delivers all kinds of messages to the sonidero for him to read during the show. These are greetings to families and friends, neighbourhoods, dance clubs or just announcements that someone in particular is present at the show. Famous people or dancers just go up to the DJ booth to be announced. Many youngsters do not dance and instead prefer to pile-up opposite the DJ's booth holding up a sign with the hopes that the Dj will read their message live. Some of these signs have very particular designs and aesthetics.

To receive a shout-out or a salutation is extremely important because it gives social prestige. It's also part of the business model of the sonidero because the show is taped live entirely and before the end of the night, it is edited on a portable computer. The sound is imported directly from the mixing tables and added to the images. Then, CD's and DVD's are made. The people who were mentioned or given shout-outs to usually buy these CD's and DVD's. This method allows them to hold on to the greetings and send them to the people who were not present at the dance. They can even upload the recording to their social network. It also allows the rest of the audience to hold on to the best moments of the party, watch the best dances again or even see themselves dancing. The audience buys an experience rather than an object; the recording works as proof that they were at the party (Ragland, 2003, 2012; Aguilar, 2014). Buying the music thus is not as important as holding on to a souvenir of the events and holding on to a reminder that they were the protagonists of the dance.

MUSICAL AND DANCING GENRES

There are three main musical genres in the sonideros dances: guaracha, salsa and cumbia with different recorded lives. Meanwhile guaracha have old Cuban recordings of the 40s sung mostly by the legendary band Sonora Matancera whose lead singer was Celia Cruz, the salsa recordings go from old Fania hits to romantic salsa from the 80s to more recent songs. On the other hand timba or contemporary Cuban Salsa are not played (salsa is appreciated in Mexico City but not in other Mexican cities) (López Cano, 2015). Therefore, Colombian cumbia is the genre mostly played, in all its varieties. The sonidero scene is evocative of potent Columbian collective imaginary; many sonidero

² Cathy Ragland noticed something similar in the performances of the sonidero DJ's in the USA: "The effects and sounds transport them to another place that is part fantasy and part irony, as is particularly evident when the 'presentation' ends with the thunderous sound of a spaceship landing and the 'swoosh' of electronic doors sliding open" (Ragland, 2003, p. 345).

or cumbia bands from Mexico have names referring Columbia; many of trademarks carry the colors of the Columbia flag. Since the 90s they have been composing a special style called “cumbia sonidera”, much influenced by the DJ’s performances.

Even if the music played in the sonidero dances covers the last 75 years, the dancers do not distinguish between genres and epochs. They dance everything in the same way. The variety in musical genres do not affect the body. It is more important to have a personal dancing style than to synchronize with the music. Many times a song, old or new, will be slowed down in order to match the dancing style. This is called “rebajada” or “slowed down” music. It is the music who has to adapt to the body.

Field work is never easy but researching over the meaning and experience of corporeal expression such as dancing is even more complicated. A very important part of the discursive and performative transformations of sonidero dances resist being put into words. The dancers focus their discourse on self-legitimization or on the social prestige that comes from being good dancers, being saluted by the sonideros or even being invited by the most famous of them to some of their special events. However, it is very difficult to obtain information about the historical development of the dance or comments on some of the features that we will see later on.

The poor neighborhoods of Mexico City have developed their own special style when they dance on Caribbean music in the sonidero parties. It is called *tibiri*: they add jump, do legs crossings and expand their movements by stretching their arms. When asked about the origin of this style, they say that it was always like this. Florentino Juárez, leader of Sonido Forys, claims that the famous Mexican actor Germán Valdés Tin Tan (1915-1973) used to dance like this in his movies in the 40s (López Cano, 2015). I also found a similar example of this dancing style by an extra in a movie of the iconic Mexican actor Mario Moreno Cantinflas (1911-1993). Ever since the 70s, Tintan movies are shown every day during lunchtime on general TV. Perhaps if *tibiri* was a generalized dance in the 40s but Tintan’s dance style has been a constant influence ever since. This is another of those fields of dialogue between the past and the present in the sonidero scene.

THE HIERARCHIZATION OF SPACE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF BODIES

There are three fundamental aspects of the sonidero dances that I would like to underline. First, the hierarchical organization of the dance spaces; second, the importance played by the gay, transvestites and transsexual community in such spaces; and third, the ways through which they are introducing new bodies akin to their own subjectivity and the impact this has on the very aesthetic of Caribbean dance, as well as on the sexual tension experienced by the participants of these dancers.

In “Introduction: Dance as Social Life and Cultural Practice”, Marusa Pusnik asserts that “dance is seen as a means of aesthetic pleasure and a means for establishing ties and specific structure in the community” (Pusnik, 2010, pp. 5 y 6). It is “a form of communication and an integral part of the reproduction of the social system” (idem). Sonidero parties reflect several of these community structures. Cathy Ragland has pointed out that in the US sonidero scene, the dancefloor becomes a collective and homogenous space where not only the participants but also their friends and families from the homeland are present by mean of the shout-outs. However, in Mexico City, as we shall see, a certain hierarchy and organization is involved regarding those spaces.

Many dancers belong to clubs of amateurs who get together to practice choreography in groups or in pairs. They usually go together to the parties and spend many hours setting up the choreographies or practice complicated dance steps. During the 70s, dance clubs would attend famous ballrooms. Only middle-class experienced dancers would participate and there would be dance challenges between the clubs. Therefore, the dancefloor became organized in circles: people would circle a pair of dancers or a group of dancers from one of the clubs in order to assess their skills. The clubs would take turn inside the circle in order to show who the best was. This structure was imitated in streets parties and was adopted by the sonideros. Nowadays, in the sonidero parties in Mexico City, we can see tens of these dancing circles throughout the street. The only people allowed inside the circles are the expert dancers. The people who circle them watch the dance carefully. They do not dance. They do not move to the rhythm of the music. They do not clap or sing, either. They just watch very attentively, still and mesmerized.

The circle is the main stage for the dances. It is the space where the dancers who want to show-off their skills to the public come. The rest of the party-goers stay outside of the circle structure. Therefore, for many poor but skilled dancers, the sonidero party is a special place where they can receive social recognition.

BODIES IN TRANSIT

Certainly, nobody knows with certainty when gay and transgendered dancers got involved in the sonidero parties, but they immediately followed the circle structure and introduced new dance moves that were quickly assimilated. The dances that present inside the circles are very diverse. For example, it is possible to see groups performing a prepared collective choreography. And traditional heterosexual couples (men and women partners) are very common. But there are also two men dancing together or a man with a transgendered partner. What is not possible to see is a couple of two women or two transgendered partners dancing together. In the Caribbean dance there are only two roles, the male, which is the lead, and the female, which is the follow. Therefore it is always the male who leads, never the women nor the transgendered.

In order to avoid any homophobic remark or the use of derogative terms, the sonidero dj's call the LGTBI dancers "third-sex girls". Their dance style is very much appreciated within the sonidero scene. Their steps and choreographies are imitated by the rest of the dancers, no matter their gender or sexual orientation. There is a process which I call "The construction of new bodies for Caribbean music". It is the combination of gestures, figures and choreographies but also the combination of the social interactions and the personal experiences they can give rise to. As we shall see, it is the gradual process of deconstruction of the archetypical and heteronormative body which erases the characteristic gender marks of the Caribbean dance. Its explicit aim is enjoyment, both individual and social. However, it is possible to infer other meanings and agencies from it. We do not know yet where this corporeal transformation is leading to. The discourse and practices do not seem to follow the agenda of the LGTBI community. Therefore, we shall consider this phenomenon as *Bodies in Transit*.

DANCE AND SUBJECTIVITY

Dance is the locus where society can integrate hegemonic discourses of nation, subject, race and sexuality. Various studies have shown that Caribbean dance participates in the historical and social development of various aspects of the Latin American identity (Aparicio, 1998; Román-Velázquez, 1999; Wade, 2000; Quintero, 2009; Fernández l'Hoeste & Pablo Vila, 2013). But other works in *Queer Studies* have underlined how changes in the hegemonic ways that courtship dance is performed also influences the development of alternative sexual subjectivities. Like Queer Tango (Savigliano, 2010; Liska 2014a, 2014b) and Gay clubs do (Rivera-Servera, 2004). It is a fact that sonidero dances allow for a temporary suspension of the bio power strategies in order to display, admire and perform alternative bodies in transit.

Interviews with members of the LGTBI community since 2008 have underlined the importance of the sonidero dances in the performative development of their sexual identities (López Cano, 2008, 2015). However, it is not easy to look at the sonidero phenomenon through the filter of Queer Studies. The sonidero movement does not see itself as queer. It does not claim to represent a community endowed with a particular sexual identity. The LGTBI dancers that participate in the sonidero dances do not interpret the way they dance as a political statement. Although it is true that they are successful at artistically disseminating their alternative bodies, they say they only aim to belong to a wider community where sexual identity is not the main concern. Therefore, it is very interesting to compare the differences between the sonideros and other Latin American musical scenes promoting otherness and sexual assertion.

The 1990s witnessed the beginning of the hypersexualization of some Latin American dances. For instance, Salsa and Cumbia are both very stylish allego-

rizations of courtship. But in later genres, such as Cuban Timba, Funk Carioca, Tecnobrega and Reggaeton, the courtship metaphor became a direct imitation of the sexual act. The allegorical symbol became an indexical sign. However, in the sonidero dance, the evolution does not rely on hypersexualization. It is a sophisticated allegorization in which, at times, instead of playing up their sexual features, bodies seem to become androgynous, ambiguous or unmarked. Therefore, the rules of symbolization of courtship are not broken; instead, new rules are invented. The movements of the sonideros are not lewd, sexual or provocative as such. They do not convey the sexuality of Funk Carioca, Tecnobrega or Cuban Timba. Instead, they are imaginative and elegant, within their own aesthetics. It is a special kind of eroticism that beckons another kind of sexual experience.

Like in many other music and dance scenes, the sonidero parties are also a place for sexual hook-ups. Alike other music genres, dance is a means of sexual seduction. It is very common to hear comments such as “if you make love the way you dance...”. In the street parties, people end up having sex in the hotels close-by or in their houses, in cars and even in the hidden and dark parts of the street. Many organizations against AIDS or STDs are present at the parties to deliver condoms. Many people have sex (straight or gay) for the first time in these parties. However, whereas in Cuban Timba and Funk Carioca seduction and sexual graze are public, in the sonidero dances they are concealed.

A MOTIONLESS PLEASURE: ANOTHER DIALOGUE

An important part of the audience does not dance or move to the music. They simply observe passively how the *bodies in transit* move within the circle of dance. In his famous book *The Modern Dance*, John Martin put forth the concept of *metakinesis*: “The process whereby the spectator re-experienced ‘the physical and psychological’ dimensions of dance movement: ‘Any bodily movement arouse a sympathetic reaction in the mind of the spectator’ (1989, s/n). This notion of metakinesis is now being reformulated in neurological studies through concepts such as “mirror neurons” (Gordziejko, 2007). In his article called “Dissolving in Pleasure: The Threat of the Queer Male Dancing Body”, Ramsay Burt used the notion of metakinesis in order to understand “the pleasure of watching a queer male dancing body” (2001, s/n). One of his most interesting claims is that this kind of contemplation generates in the passive spectator a pleasant tension that can only be broken by the physical contact with the object of desire.

In a recent focus group, Marisol Mendoza, a member of *Sonido Duende*, and Abigail la Mamazona, a transgender girl who embodies the corporative image of a number of sonidero projects, talked to me about the tension experienced by the spectators in the dance circles. They used the term *morbo*, which comes to be translated as *kinky curiosity*. They said there is a special curiosity that captures the attention of the audience and keeps them in tension. It is the curiosity

for the sexual ambiguity of trans-bodies and its particular attraction on them. The spectators who internally fight off the forbidden fantasy of dancing with a transgender are now immersed in a context that totally allows this fantasy and even invites them to fulfil it. There is also the desire to see the couple make mistakes in the dance so that the erotic tension is broken. Their conclusion is that “the concealed kinky curiosity is so intense that in the end you want it to be seen publicly and then you end up dancing with a transgender”.

CONCLUSIONS

The sonideros display an important array of meanings that are not encompassed within a verbal discourse. These are tacit and mediated through dance, body and emotion. They circulate blended and mixed up and with other elements of the verbal discourse that occur during the party. The sonidero scene offers a special capacity of agency to its participants. It allows them to build their own business model, they obtain a sense of belonging and make theirs the urban public space, and it opens up the possibility to embrace alternative sexual subjectivities. The sonideros provide scaffolding where social prestige is obtained by subjects who do not have the opportunity of such a climb in other environments of their family or professional lives. An important part of the sonidero performance relies on the construction of alternative bodies. This seems to be the most important element, to which the rest is subordinated to it. It is the construction of a custom-fitted body.

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