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Writing Cumbia Villera: Intermediality, Performance, and Neoliberalism in Washington Cucurto and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara

A partir de la crisis de 2001 en Argentina, la cumbia villera se convirtió en una música nacional. Washington Cucurto y Gabriela Cabezón Cámara incorporaron este género en su escritura para reevaluar la función política del arte en un contexto neoliberal. Este trabajo tiene dos objetivos: considerar la intermedialidad entre la cumbia y la literatura en dos novelas del período poscrisis; y analizar cómo esta intermedialidad reconfigura ideas sobre el neoliberalismo. Propongo leer la cumbia-literatura como una expresión de lo que Verónica Gago llama un "neoliberalismo desde abajo", que en sus iteraciones más utópicas, renueva el disenso democrático.

Palabras clave: *cumbia villera, Washington Cucurto, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, neoliberalismo, intermedialidad*

Following the 2001 crisis in Argentina, cumbia villera emerged as a national music. Writers such as Washington Cucurto and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara incorporated the genre in their novels to reevaluate the political function of art in a neoliberal context. This article has two objectives: to consider the intermediality between cumbia and literature in two post-crisis novels; and to analyze how this intermediality engages with and reconfigures notions of neoliberalism. I propose to read cumbia-literature as an expression of what Verónica Gago calls a "neoliberalism from below," which, in its most utopian iterations, wields the possibility of renewing democratic dissensus.

Keywords: *cumbia villera, Washington Cucurto, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, neoliberalism, intermediality*

In late 2001, a decade of neoliberal policies by the government of Carlos Menem culminated in the worst financial crisis of Argentina's history.[1]

Between 1999 and 2002, the poverty index doubled, reaching 41.5 percent (Calvento). In the ensuing decade, as the total population of Buenos Aires remained relatively stable, the population of its shantytowns or *villas miseria* grew by more than one half (Gago 274). Not by coincidence, *cumbia villera*, a subgenre of cumbia that emerged in the racially mixed, majority-migrant villas, was embraced by wide swaths of the population as a national music (Vila and Semán, Introducción 16). Cristian Alarcón's best-selling chronicle of villa youth culture *Cuando me muera, quiero que me toquen cumbia* (2003), which takes its title from the preferred song of one of Alarcón's interlocutors, is a testament to the genre's importance in villa soundscapes.

This article explores how cumbia villera formalized a sonic response to crisis-bound neoliberalism by analyzing literary adaptations by Washington Cucurto and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, in which cumbia functions as a symbol and celebration of villa life and a technology for reevaluating the political function of art in response to neoliberal policies. Post-crisis novels by these authors reproduce the affect of cumbia villera's relaxed beat, its pleasure-affirming, consumption-extolling refrains, and its ironic synthesis of scarcity and excess. What are the political possibilities of cumbia-literature in the context of neoliberal crisis? If Néstor Kirchner's successful 2003 presidential bid celebrated a "vuelta a la política" (Gago 331-32), how does cumbia-literature articulate a different politics and an alternative experience of neoliberalism? What does the intermedial expansion of popular music into literature indicate about the disciplinary specificity of artistic media at the turn of the millennium?

Cumbia emerged on the Caribbean coast of Colombia in the late nineteenth century, a mix of indigenous (*chuana*), African (*zambo*), and Iberian traditions (L'Hoeste and Vila 250). Beginning in the 1950s, it was packaged and commodified as "música tropical" at the same time as it was used to promote national identity, resulting in a predictable homogenization of its rhythm (D'Amico 39). Thus, cumbia became a symbol of Colombia while also reaching lucrative international markets in Peru, Mexico, and Argentina, where it was adapted by local communities (L'Hoeste 341). Beginning in the 1980s, cumbia was commonly heard in Argentinian *bailantas* (dance halls), a term that refers both to the genre of "tropical music" and to the venues where it was played (Martín, "Cumbia" 213). By the end of the twentieth century, the offshoot subgenre of cumbia villera was explicitly associated with the villas. Cumbia is characterized by its relaxed and unsyncopated repeating rhythm.

The literary incorporation of cumbia villera can be interpreted under the rubric of an "intermedial turn" in the arts, a phenomenon typically associated with early twentieth-century modernism (Wolf,

"(Inter)Mediality"; Prieto, "El concepto" 9). Intermediality has become increasingly commonplace in the postmodern or neoliberal era (Wolf, *Musicalization* 183-228), to the point where Florencia Garramuño identifies a generalized "condición posmedial" of contemporary art (131). By incorporating cumbia's rhythmic and lyrical features into writing, cumbia-literature generates "an *illusion* of another medium's specific practices" (in this case, music), which creates "a sense of visual or acoustic presence" (Rajewsky 55). Daniel Albright identifies such intermedial illusions with pseudomorphosis, a process where a substance is changed but its appearance remains unchanged: one "medium is asked to ape, or do the work of, some alien medium" (212). For Julio Prieto, intermediality creates a feeling of "extrañamiento" that opens "una visión otra," another vision and a vision of the other ("El concepto" 15). W.J.T. Mitchell names this opening "ekphrastic ambivalence," the simultaneous fear and hope that one medium might become another, an ambivalence he links to our anxiety about otherness (152-56).

Contemporary Latin American narrative, Luz Horne argues, tends toward the performative (Horne 23), capitalizing on the necessarily multimedial character of performance (Kattenbelt 23; see also Bay-Cheng, Kattenbelt, and Lavender). Culture is understood not merely as a collection of ideas "pero también un conjunto de acciones con que se encuentra el participante de una escena a la hora de actuar" (Laddaga 22). The performativity of cumbia bailantas enters the prose of Cucurto and Cabezón Cámara as part of a broader impulse to bring literature into life and imagine new ways of living together (Garramuño 182). As Abraham Acosta puts it, "not only are the conditions for politics unpredictable and precarious, but they also have to actually take place; the egalitarian contingency must be enacted, activated, in performative fashion" (75).

I will focus on two novelistic pseudomorphs of cumbia villera: Cucurto's *El rey de la cumbia contra los fucking Estados Unidos de América* (2010) and Cabezón Cámara's *Romance de la Negra Rubia* (2014). In different ways, both novels reveal, by "jumping the track" from music to literature (Edwards 22), complex and ambivalent views about the place of literature and art in post-crisis Argentinian society. The political economy audible in these works is symptomatic of the way the crisis "abrió el espacio para expresiones culturales que trabajan con los restos de la política neoliberal de los años noventa" (Ros 23). My objectives are twofold and interlocking: (1) to consider the political implications of the way cumbia villera is incorporated formally and thematically in each novel; and (2) to analyze how such intermediality engages with and reconfigures neoliberal rationality.

I will argue that Cucurto and Cabezón Cámara use cumbia to explore a mode of neoliberalism not bound up with the restoration of power to

economic elites (Harvey 19), nor a mode of "governmentality" wherein economic imperatives serve as the basis for state governance (Foucault 89), but rather as a regime of social existence expressed in alternative economies and communities of affect (Gago 21). For Verónica Gago, the villas of post-crisis Buenos Aires provide a privileged locus for studying the way neoliberal rationality is imbedded on a molecular level as an "impulso vital" for potentially resistant and even democratic invention: a "repertorio de prácticas comunitarias" that adapt neoliberal tenets of liberty, consumption, and calculus to invent new ways of using money and time (35-36). Gago names this practice of dis- and re-aggregating received notions of neoliberalism a "neoliberalismo desde abajo" (12). What is the democratizing potential of redistributing neoliberal consensus from below? How does cumbia-literature intervene in this framework to facilitate a critique of neoliberalism? What does the literary aping of cumbia reveal about the form and function of art in neoliberal society?

Washington Cucurto (pseudonym of Norberto Santiago Vega) is best known for having co-founded the Eloísa Cartonera publishing house in 2001, which began, in 2003, to produce and distribute books by Latin American authors with photocopied pages and covers made out of recycled carboard.[2] The crisis had precipitated an unprecedented increase in the price and demand for cardboard (*cartón*), and Eloísa Cartonera responded to the phenomenon of *cartonerismo*, a widespread, semi-clandestine practice of collecting and reselling the material. Cucurto's editorial project and his literary poetics mirror each other. Ben Bollig identifies a "poética del robo" in Cucurto's writing that reproduces the "usufructo latente en el proyecto Eloísa Cartonera" by indiscriminately plagiarizing tropes of orality and populism (e.g., Peronism) and elements of "high" culture (e.g., Jorge Luis Borges) (Bollig 151). Mónica Bernabé similarly suggests that Cucurto's writing "tritura los restos de la alta cultura, hace su remix al ritmo de la cumbia" (120). Ofelia Ros examines how Cucurto's self-styled *realismo atolondrado* "subraya el humor chabacano, racista, clasista y xenófobo de escenas cotidianas," even as it is located "más allá de la mímesis del lenguaje de las calles, y más allá de un lenguaje destilado y alambicado" (31-34). Carolina Rolle suggests that Cucurto requires an "análisis metodológico del *tránsito*, del *pasaje* entre la literatura y otras artes" ("Poéticas" 211), highlighting the transmedial relation of his writing to comics ("Washington"). Djurdja Trajkovic draws on Jacques Rancière's notion of democratic dissensus to identify in Cucurto's writing a "nomadic avant-garde" that "unsettle[s] the consensus of the previous generation" (323). It is this line of inquiry I take up here, with the aim of developing a Rancièrian analysis of cumbia-literature in the context of its ambivalent "neoliberalism from below."

For Rancière, democracy is not one political regime among others, but rather politics itself, characterized by the paradoxical rule by those who have no specific qualification to rule (*Dissensus* 53). The people (*demos*) is not a political body, not the "population," not even "the poor" or "the oppressed," but rather a "surplus community" whose "power must be re-enacted ceaselessly by political subjects that … re-stage the anarchic foundation of the political" (53-54). Democracy is practiced in the continual renewal of dissensus, the redistribution of the common and of the sensible through political subjectivation (140-41). One motor for redistributing the common is through the inclusion of "newcomers" (women, ethnic "minorities," immigrants), as Rancière puts it, "the part of those who have no part" (*Dissensus* 60). Another involves the way art intervenes in the sensory experience of sharing the common, or the "distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*), by redistributing affective relationships.

Rancière divides his treatment of the way art intervenes in the "distribution of the sensible" into three non-mutually exclusive regimes based around Platonic formalism and Aristotelian mimesis. What he calls the *ethical regime* captures the Platonic notion of the work of art as an image or sign (*Politics* 13). The *representative regime*, in turn, refers to the Aristotelian "doubling or dividing of theater" as both representation and manifestation (*mimesis*) of reality, while the *aesthetic regime* implies a rupture in the "mimetic divide" in which the work of art becomes an interface or choreography (*Politics* 14). These new inputs in sensory experience reconfigure notions of "high" and "low," constitute new affective relationships, and, under limited circumstances, renew democratic dissensus. But how might Rancière's *aesthetic regime* operate in a system predetermined by neoliberal rationality where, as Mark Fisher suggests in *Capitalist Realism*, art is pre-emptively conditioned to reproduce the aspirations and hopes of capitalist culture (9)? What are the contours and conditions of possibility for democratic dissensus under a neoliberal regime of art?

Cabezón Cámara's *Romance de la Negra Rubia* addresses the ambivalent politics of neoliberal aesthetics by developing a complex relation between the body and money (Laera), the intimate and the public (Montes 29), and between performance and commodification (Ríos). If the corporeal excess of Cucurto's "sloppy realism" suggests a more complex or indirect operation than the mimetic pact of "social realism" and hence exhibits avant-garde tendencies (Trajkovic), Cabezón Cámara further disrupts received distinctions between "high" and low" to "desfigura[r] la realidad social para contarla como exceso y en desborde" (Kohan 12). *Romance de la Negra Rubia* overflows literature itself: the body becomes the site of writing and, at a crucial moment, the text recedes into an avant-garde

cumbia performance. It is precisely "el ritmo cumbiero el que hace saltar de un registro a otro sin demasiado respeto por supuestas normas de representación" (Fernández 112).

These novels' ambivalent articulation from below of neoliberal rationality reevaluates binaries of administered and un-administered time, scarcity and excess, resistance and obedience, as well as teleologies of revolution and emancipation. According to Gago, neoliberalism is characterized by its "dinámica de variaciones permanentes, … *variaciones de sentido*, en los ritmos recursivos, no lineales, de tiempo, como trastocamientos impulsados por las luchas sociales" (24). Cucurto and Cabezón Cámara invite hearing cumbia villera as the sound of these recursive rhythms of neoliberal variation. Their self-reflexive cumbia writing elaborates "*una literatura fuera de sí*" (Garramuño 45), an abandonment of the specificity of the literary medium signaling alternative modes of community during a moment overdetermined by the individuating impulse of neoliberal excess.

CUCURTO'S CUMBIA CALCULUS

The populism of President Juan Perón (1945-1955) precipitated a mass migration from the Argentinian interior and neighboring countries such as Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru to the Buenos Aires suburbs. The villas, majority-migrant communities of precarious infrastructure, began to emerge there following the 1955 coup that overthrew Perón (Martín, "History" 26-27). At first temporary settlements, villas became increasingly permanent dwellings as residents acquired more durable building materials (Gago 255-56). These multi-ethnic communities challenged notions of whiteness in a country that, unlike much of Latin America, never conceived of itself as racially mixed. The consistent displacement of race by class in Argentinian notions of blackness (both pejorative and populist) reinforced a melting-pot, or *crisol de razas*, national myth of ethnic homogenization (Rolle, "Washington" 189). As early as the 1930s, poor migrants to Buenos Aires from the interior (mostly dark-haired, dark-skinned mestizos of indigenous descent) were pejoratively labeled *negros*. Perón's working class populism embraced the label, resignifying *negro* to refer to Peronist workers (Karush 216), a usage that carried over into villa lexicons, where *negro* became synonymous with *villero* (Bernabé 117). Thus, following a decade of Menem's neoliberal policies that further polarized Argentinian society, pioneer cumbia villera group Flor de Piedra announced in a lyric: "Que yo soy un villero que soy un negro" (Flor de Piedra).

With the loss of upward mobility for middle and working classes in the late 1990s, the villas rapidly expanded (Martín, "Cumbia" 214). Cumbia villera became the soundtrack of neoliberal life, circulating not only through

informal economies around bailanta gatherings but also on the radio (Martín, "History" 26). Groups like Pibes Chorros, Flor de Piedra, and Yerba Brava provided an escape from everyday scarcity promising freedom and excess: the liberty of un-administered time; the ephemeral pleasure of alcohol, drugs, and easy sex; and a relaxed, almost hypnotic rhythmic pattern. Cumbia villera participants affirmed the right to participate in the neoliberal "fiesta menemista," from which the poor and working classes had been excluded (De Gori 356–58).

Cucurto's *El rey de la cumbia contra los fucking Estados Unidos de América* takes place in the poor neighborhood of Constitución during the 2000s and develops the coarse language, hypersexual motifs, short refrains, and repeated rhythmic cell of cumbia villera into a series of cyclic vignettes surrounding the space of the bailanta. Pervasive parataxis, self-reflexive irony, and incessant repetition pull the reader into what feels like an extended cumbia lyric. As was commonplace in cumbia villera, Cucurto recovers villa blackness as a marker of ethnic heterogeneity, combined with Latin Americanist mestizaje (Bernabé; Rolle, "El barrio"):

> Ay, la sagrada morochosidad del mundo. Aguante las mezclas, los mestizajes, los criollismos, viva el indio con el español o el tano o el turco o el árabe o el polaco, de ahí viene la cumbia: ¡qué picazón deleitoso [*sic*] tenerla instalada como otitis en los tímpanos! No parés nunca cumbia. Que el mundo paré, sí. Que los yanquis hagan bosta todo, Irak, Cuba, Venezuela, el Mar Rojo, que se llenen el culo de petróleo, me importa un güevo todo con tal de que la cumbia no pare nunca... (Cucurto, *El rey* 14)

Here the narrator Norberto (whose name's correspondence with the author's own is no coincidence) apostrophizes cumbia in what is also, following Brent Hayes Edwards, an "apostrophe of form" (82). In the interstices of Cucurto's playful parataxis, the reader can almost discern verses from Yerba Brava's "La murga de la yerba/Negro José" released a few years earlier: "Ay que hermoso pedo tengo no puedo más / no me quedan ni dos pesos pero igual / sí esta noche quiero fiesta, quiero bailar / y que no termine más" (Yeba Brava).

Elsewhere, Norberto affirms: "mi raza también convive en el mismo techo con la raza negrera moderna" (Cucurto 34). Like cumbia villera musicians, Cucurto's cumbia celebrates the blackness (*morochosidad*) of the poor, multi-ethnic, multi-national bailanta participants. As Bernabé suggests, "los negros de Cucurto practican el cosmopolitismo del pobre" (123). Trajkovic argues that Cucurto

> deliberately decides to bring light to the poor, the blacks, those outsiders who are not commonly seen in Argentine fiction, as agents of intellectual labor. He is simply

not acting according to the rules of the marginalized literary trope. Literature serves as a motor to explore the experience, create communities, and include subjectivities from below, from the outside. … [I]t exposes and mirrors the homologizing tendencies of the neoliberal publishing market, the previous generation of intellectuals and writers. (331)

In this sense, Cucurto's literary project, like his copy-left editorial initiative, can enact a democratizing gesture of Rancièrian dissensus. But what possibilities for democratic dissensus are available in the disavowal of the world for a cumbia bailanta, in the exchange of the petrodollar economy for cumbia's repetitive rhythm?

Cucurto's cumbia-literature inhabits the "*consumo y bienestar infinito*" of daily bailanta attendance (De Gori 358): "libertad total, … otra vez el malecón de la música, la transpiración y el amor" (Cucurto, *El rey* 64). The prose of *El rey de la cumbia* is highly recursive, an extended meditation *about* cumbia that is also *like* cumbia:

oigo las letras de la cumbia y me entristezco. Imposible no deprimirse con las letras de la cumbia. … ¡Qué fiesta! Cuánta alegría puede representar una letra vacía y una música monótona cuando nuestra vida viene del infierno, del robo, de la violación… Mas entre tantas ya solamente quiero unita dulce y tierna que me quiera para quererla… Y girar y bailantear hasta desaparecer. Tetitas saltando. ¿Qué música hay que seguir en la vida sino es esta que nos manda nuestra desesperación? (Cucurto, *El rey* 20-22)

Pairing the two above quotes from the novel illustrates the central ambivalence of Cucurto's cumbia: on the one hand, the promise of total liberty and infinite pleasure and, on the other, the delivery of "empty lyrics" and "monotonous music" that returns listeners to the desperation they sought to escape.

If Cucurto "can be read both as parody as well as experimentation with the boundaries of literary forms" (Trajkovic 330), an ambivalent, unstable form of parody is also central to cumbia villera itself. Where commercially successful cumbia featured the romantic tropes and sexualized innuendo characteristic of the *bolero* (perhaps explaining Cucurto's mention of the *malecón*, an allusion to Caribbean nightlife),[3] cumbia villera pushed these tropes to ironic excess, openly endorsing the alcohol, drugs, sexuality, and misogyny of the bailantas. Following the insights of second wave feminism, these lyrics can be heard as a form of "symbolic terrorism" that is shared across other popular genres in Latin America (Vila and Semán, *Troubling* 57), notably Brazilian *funk* and Caribbean reggaeton.[4] However, cumbia villera's unaccented, non-syncopated rhythm is slower than that of *funk* or

reggaeton: typically around 80 beats per minute, compared to the 100 bmp of the average Puerto Rican reggaeton tune, or the frenetic 130 bmp *pancadão* rhythm of Brazilian *funk*.[5] In cumbia villera, the playful antithesis of relaxed rhythm and violently misogynist lyrics seems to underscore the listening experience with parody.

Parody plays an important role in cumbia villera performances, "as the singers actively search for dancers' smiles as if they are asking for reassurance that the dancers understand the songs' comic intentions" (Vila and Semán, *Troubling* 53). For example, in the music video for "La lechera," whose lyrics demean a woman for having oral sex with multiple partners, a woman dances while seductively drinking boxed milk, creating a kitsch antithesis of offensive and benign. The song perhaps exposes the powerlessness of a presumably heterosexual narrator to control female sexuality (Vila and Semán, *Troubling* 61). Vila and Semán suggest, in this respect, that cumbia villera lyrics rehearse an ambivalent misogyny underscored with the critical distance of self-conscious irony: "what is performed in the scenario and the dance hall in a comedic key, as a humorous representation, speaks at the same time of an acceptance and ironic distancing in relation to the sexist discourses deployed by the lyrics" (*Troubling* 65). Cucurto capitalizes on this exaggerated, self-reflexive irony, mobilizing cumbia as his own ars poetica: his prose inhabits and reflects on the bailanta's ambivalence of scarcity and excess, sadness and joy, freedom and emptiness, love and sex, violation and tenderness, dance and desperation.

El rey de la cumbia engages in no explicit critique or rejection of the political and economic crisis ("nuestra desesperación") in which the genre emerged. Instead, as with his Cartonera publishing, Cucurto's cumbia operates within the paradigm of what George Yúdice calls a (neoliberal) "cultural resource": "with the reciprocal permeation of culture and economy … social organization, and even attempts at social emancipation, seem to feed back into the system they resist or oppose" (28). In post-crisis Argentina, as Gago's fieldwork suggests, informal economies such as those emergent in the outdoor market of La salada (one of the largest venues in Latin America for selling textiles and all manner of "falsified" commodities) inaugurated "modos de vida que reorganizan las nociones de *libertad, cálculo y obediencia*, proyectando una nueva racionalidad y afectividad colectiva" (Gago 23). The reproduction and circulation of falsified copies of the goods to which villa residents had been denied access does not represent a break with neoliberal sensibilities (Bernabé 121). Nor, however, does this economy signal the subsumption of popular "resistance" into a hegemonic economic rationality. Instead, spaces like La salada and, I argue, cumbia bailantas house a set of practices and negotiations of everyday

survival centered around the same neoliberal parameters (liberty, calculation, and obedience, among others) they might otherwise seek to oppose.

Fundamental to the ambivalent resignification from below of neoliberalism is the *fiesta*, a term Gago uses to refer specifically to religious celebrations but that applies also to bailanta gatherings: "La fiesta será una imagen que utilizaremos para llevar al máximo la noción de ambivalencia de un dispositivo comunitario. Pero también para amplificar … nociones tales como gasto, riqueza y consumo. La fiesta, como economía del frenesí, se vuelve totalmente interna a la villa" (32). Both *economía* and *frenesí* are central to bailanta culture. On the one hand, bailantas functioned as the locus for an informal economy where the circulation of nominal entrance fees and pirated CDs remained internal to the villa (Wilson and Favoretto 175). On the other, like all large gatherings of people whose bodies come into contact, bailantas created new affective relationships and experiences of time (Vianna 50-71).

The temporality of the bailanta, as Eloísa Martín puts it, breaks the traditional distinction between work and pleasure:

> un tiempo ajeno a la disciplina de la escuela y el trabajo: no administrado; la sucesión de las noches y las mañanas y de los días de la semana no regulan ni diferencian el descanso de la actividad. Al contrario, más que el reloj o el calendario, es el efecto de las drogas y el alcohol – cuyo consumo se efectúa a cualquier hora y en cualquier día – el que demarca el límite entre la vigilia y el sueño. ("Cumbia" 221)

The bailanta is a space of un-administered time: "cualquier hora es buena," Cucurto's narrator affirms (64). This temporality is marked by the repetitive, unaccented rhythm of cumbia, which grants each beat roughly equal emphasis, rather than accenting the one. Coupled with the repetition ad nauseam of short stanzas of lyrics, cumbia's rhythmic affect is a musical un-administering of time, an opening up where each beat, or any time, unfolds as equally good and must be optimized for maximal pleasure. The circular time of Cucurto's frenetic prose returns repeatedly to the bailanta, capturing cumbia's relaxed rhythmic ostinato:

> Baile, baile, baile. … Y corremos a la barra. ¿Las cinco, las seis, las siete de la mañana? Sí, sí, cualquier hora es buena porque estoy con el muchachito de mi corazón, el rey de la bailanta, el ilegal para las leyes argentinas que mi corazón y mi vida legalizan ya. (64)

Significantly, Cucurto queers the implicitly heterosexual male narrator of cumbia lyrics (Vila and Semán, *Troubling* 63; see also Trajkovic 323).

During the neoliberal 1990s, Cucurto's early literary production was tied to groups of friends self-publishing queer poetry (Trajkovic 324). These groups matured into what Cecilia Palmeiro identifies as "un contracanon *queer-trash*" (18), facilitated by the independent publishing house and gallery Belleza y Felicidad (founded by Fernanda Laguna and Cecilia Pavón) and Cucurto's own Eloísa Cartonera (co-founded with Javier Barilaro and Fernanda Laguna). And while the syntactic and narrative structure of *El rey de la cumbia*, as well as its recurrent tropes of consumption, liberty, and hypersexuality, are strongly evocative of their musical pretext, Cucurto does not simply produce a textual copy of cumbia. The novel is rather a queering of the bailantas that undermines the quasi-ethnographic realism it promises.

The legacy of realism in contemporary Argentinian literature has been the subject of extensive critique (Horne 18). Martín Kohan suggests that an overreliance on realism is bound up with a turn toward autofiction or auto-figuration (10). The result is "un sobredimensionamiento del yo," whose subjectivity becomes coterminous with what it describes (11). Cucurto is among the authors Kohan criticizes under this rubric. At stake is a questioning of the capacity of realism in contemporary reality to intervene in the redistribution of the common or, put differently, the politics of realism under a neoliberal regime of art. What Kohan identifies as an "abuse of realism" implies a departure from Rancière's *aesthetic regime*: literary realism no longer holds its emancipatory promise of reversing "the hierarchies of representation" (*Politics* 24). This realism is merely a poor copy: not a rejection of the "mimetic divide," but an impoverished mimesis.

However, María Teresa Gramuglio cautions that any discussion of realism must clarify the distinction between the specific literary genre associated with nineteenth-century Europe and the transhistorical imperative to represent reality (7-16). One of the most important contributions to this debate has been Josefina Ludmer's notion of "literaturas posautónomas," referring to works where the distinction between fiction and reality is emptied of meaning. The purpose of contemporary literature, Ludmer suggests, is no longer to represent reality but rather to "fabricar presente" (237). Building on Ludmer, Sandra Contreras argues that "nuevos realismos" not only depart from traditional modes of representation but transform "la noción misma de 'real'" (8). Horne similarly notes that whereas early twentieth century avant-garde writers rejected mimesis by emphasizing the artificiality and impossibility of representation, contemporary "post-vanguardist" realisms deploy avant-garde techniques precisely to generate "un efecto de realidad" (21). Cucurto's cumbia-literature is not a literary representation of cumbia but rather a metonymical byproduct of the bailanta milieu it seeks to inhabit.

One of the through lines of bailanta life, cumbia lyrics, and *El rey de la cumbia* is the concept of *aguante*, referring to the capacity for physical and moral resistance. Originating in soccer slang, in villa lexicons aguante encapsulates the capacity to withstand an exploitative system, courage and bravery during robbery or other extralegal activity, and the ability to withstand the excessive consumption and sleepless nights of repeated bailanta attendance (Martín, "Cumbia" 223). In the bailantas, aguante reflects a resistant obedience vis-à-vis neoliberal crisis: the possibility of reconfiguring the world from below as a party. As Esteban de Gori puts it, "mediante el *olvido se puede captar el mundo* y narrarlo como *fiesta*" (355-56). Or in the lyrics of cumbia villera group Ráfaga: "Vamos todos a gozar / las penas y el dolor / tenemos que olvidar / vamos a bailar." The ambiguous verses can be heard as either affirming that sorrows and pains must be enjoyed (if *gozar* is enjambed), or that enjoyment in dance allows for the forgetting of sorrows and pains. Both possibilities structure *aguante*, the mutually constitutive pleasure and pain of dancing to forget.

Furthermore, in their plural first-person subject the Ráfaga lyrics also highlight an additional "resistant" element of the bailantas and of Cucurto's cumbia: what Gago refers to as the "ambivalencia de un dispositivo comunitario" (32). Otherwise critical of Cucurto, Beatriz Sarlo nonetheless attributes to him the invention of a "narrador sumergido," who "nunca es superior a sus personajes ni en ideas ni en experiencias" (*Escritos* 479). As a result, according to Sarlo, there is no causal connection or organizing principle governing the plot, or even the syntax. Cucurto's writing lacks literary autonomy, which also suggests that his first-person protagonist is a sort of anonymous or collective subject. If, when viewed from above, neoliberal liberty and calculus are mutually exclusive with the sort of affective communities Rancière envisions for the renewal of dissensus, in Cucurto's cumbia, these principles are democratized, enjoyed by "everybody and anyone at all" (*Dissensus* 53).

However, even as the cumbia ensemble overflows the confines of the bailanta, a latent neoliberal calculus of phone numbers, drinks, dance partners, work hours, and bus schedules resurfaces within the bailanta:

> Vuelvo al baile un poco triste. Son las 4 y 45. Todavía tengo media hora, veo a Cecilio bailando con unas guainas de quince años. Estoy cansadísimo. Eh, kuera, venga que le presento esas chiquititas, dice. Qué amiguitas, Cecilio. Sé que no hay tiempo y me tranquilizo. Me dedico a preguntar nombres y pedir números de teléfonos y horarios de salidas de trabajo para armar un paseíto por el parque y después telo y camastro. Y a contar las estrellas. (Cucurto, *El rey* 52)

Here exuberance turns to sadness. Suddenly "no hay tiempo": in the final half-hour, Norberto seeks the promise of deferred pleasure (the continuation of the bailanta by other means) in the "*cálculo urbano*" of work schedules and phone numbers for future erotic encounters (Gago 36). Administered time, in fact, demarcates the bailanta on either side, being the condition of possibility for arrival and departure: "El [autobús] 130 no llega más. No aguanto, meto la mano en el bolsillo, cuento los billetes y lo poco que tengo separo: cinco mangos para el baile, diez para dos birras. Y diez para el taxi, llego justo" (Cucurto, *El rey* 63). Maximizing pleasure during the bailanta requires strict monetary calculus.

El rey de la cumbia oscillates between daily bailanta vignettes and work shifts at the French-owned multinational supermarket chain Carrefour, where Norberto sorts and stacks vegetables (Cucurto, *El rey* 16).[6] The antithesis suggests a substitution between two economies: a globalized neoliberal free-trade economy for the internal neoliberalism from below of the bailanta. It also suggests a chain of additional substitutions: one form of monotony (stacking vegetables) for another (cumbia); one form of sustenance (produce) for another (beer and drugs). Finally, the substitution of Carrefour for cumbia reveals the replacement of one repeating rhythm (work time) with another (musical time). Marking time evenly while unmarking the rhythm of work, cumbia musicalizes a form of resistant obedience vis-à-vis administered time. What, however, are the political possibilities of these substitutions?

For Sarlo, Cucurto's writing espouses an anti-populism that "celebra no la verdad del Pueblo sino su capacidad para coger, bailar cumbia, enamorarse y girar toda la noche" ("Sujetos" 5). She similarly critiques the exoticism of Cucurto's "lectores cultos," who "lo leen con la diversión con que las capas medias escuchan cumbia" ("Sujetos" 5). In this sense, Sarlo accuses Cucurto of petit-bourgeois sensibility, foregrounding desire without object and the *joie de vivre* of bodily excess as an end in itself. However, if "la exageración rompe la ilusión etnográfica" of writing in a "lengua baja" ("Sujetos" 5), it must also be emphasized that the same predilection for exaggeration is already a motor of cumbia lyrics. Cucurto and cumbia are of the same quasi-ethnographic ambivalence.

Other critics have extolled Cucurto's "mala escritura" as part of a longer tradition running through Macedonio Fernández, Roberto Arlt, Osvaldo Lamborghini, César Aira, and others (Prieto, "Realismo" 112; see also Prieto, *La escritura* 13). For Prieto, Cucurto participates in and openly plagiarizes this tradition to simulate the experience of a communitarian popular identity "como si se tratara de un polirrítmico baile de cumbia" ("Realismo" 117). Cucurto himself has labelled several of his works "cumbielas" (Palmeiro 302), and Prieto associates his cumbia intermediality with the

illusion of orality and a kitsch combination of incongruent materials ("Realismo" 116, 123). In this sense, cumbia-literature reflects the "as if" character of intermedial reference (Rajewsky 55), evoking or imitating the music from within the literary medium. Yet this intermediality also expands the medium of literature such that the received specificity of the medium is lost (Garramuño 36). Furthermore, Cucurto's orality recalls older genealogies of writing and reading practices (Laddaga 190-97). This is perhaps the sense in which Cucurto disavows his own literariness, calling his writing not only "realismo atolondrado," but also "protoliteratura" (Trajkovic 329). Borrowing from Fred Moten, *El rey de la cumbia* is both ante- and anti-literature (viii), and it is by writing cumbia villera that Cucurto situates his literary project prior to, within, and against the literary field.

Finally, Cucurto's cumbia writing contains not only recycled fragments of literature and cumbia but also recycled parameters of the economic system in which it emerged. *El rey de la cumbia* asserts that *we can do neoliberalism better*, reevaluating the form and function of work and pleasure and illustrating cumbia's capacity to reconfigure sensory experience from below. As Trajkovic has argued, the insertion of Cucurto, an autodidact, into publishing markets as an author and an editor is itself an expression of Rancièrian dissensus.[7] It marks the successful commodification of literary works with no specific qualification to be there, renewing the "part of those who have no part" (Rancière 33). Publishing power is of course not a sufficient condition for political power, but in a region conditioned by a strong correlation between political administration and literary elites (Rama), it remains significant.

Rancière cites as one of his recurrent literary examples of the renewal of dissensus the initial reception of Flaubert, whose "very refusal to entrust literature with any message whatsoever was considered to be evidence of democratic equality" (*Politics* 14). Can a similar observation be made of cumbia-literature, which, in its refusal of literature itself, negates the autonomy of writing and the possibility of reading "well" or "poorly"? Does the exercise of writing cumbia villera mark, as Ludmer puts it, "el proceso del cierre de la literatura autónoma, abierta por Kant y la modernidad" (240-41)? If the "aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity" (Rancière, *Politics* 23), what does cumbia-literature's lack of singularity suggest about a neoliberal regime of art? Uninterested in singularity or autonomy, Cucurto writes with the poetry of a bus schedule, the promise of an erotic encounter, the pleasure of a cumbia lyric.

CABEZÓN CÁMARA'S CUMBIA PERFORMANCE

In the previous section, I suggested that the kitsch aesthetic and overflowing of verisimilitude with neoliberal excess in *El rey de la cumbia* make Cucurto's writing resonate with cumbia villera's ambivalent irony. In this sense, *El rey de la cumbia* participates in the postmedial, "unspecific" character of art that Garramuño associates with the contemporary moment (131). I turn now to a different literary incorporation of cumbia villera, present in Cabezón Cámara's *Romance de la Negra Rubia*, which moves outside the space of the bailanta to provide a structural critique of literature under a neoliberal regime while reflecting more broadly on the relationship between art and politics.

Like *El rey de la cumbia*, *Romance de la Negra Rubia* commences in a Buenos Aires villa in the early 2000s. And as with Cucurto's narrator Norberto, Cabezón Cámara's narrator, a poet, is named in passing as Gabi (a clear autobiographical wink from the author). Confronting eviction and intoxicated after two days of excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs, Cabezón Cámara's narrator-poet attempts self-immolation as an act of protest. She awakes later in a hospital to discover that she has become the "sacrificio fundante" or "mito de origen" of a social movement (*Romance* 32), even a prospective candidate for public office: "El eslogan salió como patada: 'Votá a Gabi que por vos se sacrifica'" (63). Taking advantage of her newfound political power, she begins to raise money to help with the housing crisis and other pro-poor movements. She is subsequently invited to participate in a "mega installation" at the Argentinian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, where she plays the role of "la sacrificada" (37). There, she meets and falls in love with the Swiss art patron Elena, who suffers from terminal cancer. The couple agrees that upon her death, Elena's face will be transferred to the narrator's. With Elena's money (an obvious reference to Swiss banks and tax havens) and white face, the "negra rubia" develops a successful political career and finds time and space to write. Comedically grotesque and queer, the plot cycles through a chain of objectifications of the narrator's body: from political object (martyr) to aesthetic object (performance piece) to economic object (commodity).

Two years prior to the publication of *Romance*, in 2012, the Venice Biennale began a large-scale restoration project of its flagship Sale d'Armi complex, including a permanent pavilion for Argentina ("Sale"). The architectural restoration of the Argentinian Pavilion was completed in 2018 in an exhibition entitled *Horizontal Vertigo*, an effort to map Argentinian architectural production since the return to democracy in "a horizontal landscape where interventions and initiatives come circumstantially in contact, in dialogue, in resonance" (Dejtiar). Writing in the context of the still

unrealized restoration, Cabezón Cámara imagines a different sort of Argentinian Pavilion, constructed out of fragments of cumbia villera:

> "Te compro porque tu obra está inconclusa": lo dijo a las dos horas de dar vueltas por el Pabellón Argentino en la Bienal de Venecia. Había entrado como tantos, llamada por la música compuesta para la ocasión, una especie de cumbia gótica y dodecafónica, deconstruida y vuelta a armar como si se desarmara una villa chapa a chapa y ladrillo a ladrillo y con esos materiales se edificara una catedral tan ojival como casi todas las que valen la pena pero sin nada de su solidez, con la luz entrando en haces desordenados por todas partes, atravesada de rayos, una catedral agujereada como una obra de Marcela Astorga, una que careciera de esa prepotencia de cimiento eterno y de escalera al cielo que tiene toda catedral. Era una música que se venía abajo, una inminencia de caída que no evitaba el lugar común y duplicaba la amenaza con lapsos de "silencio atronador", estoy citando el catálogo. (*Romance* 37)

The original nucleus of the Sale D'Armi dates to around 1460, the waning years of the late Gothic period (although the building itself features primarily rounded, Roman archways). This ekphrastic passage describes a deconstructed musical cathedral, a Gothic sonic architecture held together by a twelve-tone permutation of cumbia villera.[8] The kitsch antitheses between "high" and "low" are striking: on the one hand, the verticality of Gothic pointed archways; on the other, the precarity of horizontally adjacent villa bricks; on the one hand, live cumbia "composed for the occasion"; on the other, dodecaphonic music.

Twelve-tone music emerged in the early twentieth century as part of an effort to emancipate music from the hierarchy of tonality. Conceived by Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern of the Second Viennese School, these composers rejected the centuries-old division of the western scale into tonic, dominant, subdominant, etc., endeavoring instead to treat each of the twelve semi-tones equally. Compositions created sets or "rows" ordering the twelve-note scale and explored their permutations. Dynamics and rhythm were also, at times, treated serially. As Rancière puts it (paraphrasing Adorno), Schoenberg's music,

> in order to denounce the capitalist division of labour and the adornments of commodification, … has to take that division of labour yet further, to be still more technical, more 'inhuman' than the products of capitalist mass production. But this inhumanity, in turn, makes the stain of what has been repressed appear and disrupt the work's perfect technical arrangement. (*Dissensus* 129)

Twelve-tone music is diametrically opposed to cumbia villera: the former emblematic of the western European avant-garde; the latter, a popular

music associated with poor sectors of the Global South. Where twelve-tone music critiques the capitalist division of labor, cumbia adopts, exaggerates, and parodies neoliberalism. In both cases, however, the economic structure to which the artwork responds resurfaces in sensory perception.

Cabezón Cámara not only explores the way cumbia could catalyze a democratizing shift in collective sensory experience, but sutures "high" and "low" such that the erotic encounter between the Swiss patron and the "negra rubia" results in a queering of literature itself. Scholars have commented on the novel's oxymoronic juxtapositions (Fernández 113; Montes 36), which extend even to its title. In the Hispanic poetic tradition, the *romance* genre dates to the early fifteenth century, when it referred to sung, octosyllabic ballads. The themes of *romances* evolved from historical accounts of heroic deeds (*romances eruditos*) to lyric poetry (*romances artísticos*) to "blind beggar ballads" (*romances vulgares*) (Clarke). The transition from *romances eruditos* to *romances vulgares* in the early seventeenth century anticipates a certain democratization of literature that Rancière associates with the nineteenth-century realist novel (although Mikhail Bakhtin made a similar case for the dialogic character of *Don Quijote*, published more than two centuries earlier [324]). For Rancière, what is radical about the realist novel is a "principle of democratic equality"; in the case of *Madame Bovary*, for example, "the adultery committed by a farmer's daughter is as interesting as the heroic actions of great men" (*Politics* 55-56). Furthermore, Emma Bovary's "chief crime is to wish to bring art into her life," which makes *Madame Bovary* the "first manifesto against kitsch" (Rancière, *Dissensus* 129). In refusing the opposition between literature and life that Flaubert is seen to have democratized, *Romance de la Negra Rubia* could be considered a manifesto in favor of kitsch.

Poking fun at the reader's attempt to interpret the figure of a gothic villa-cathedral constructed out of brick-fragments of twelve-tone cumbia, Cabezón Cámara's narrator breaks the allegory by admitting that she is "citing from the catalogue." That is, the description is written from the perspective of a European curator, implying that cumbia operates as a folkloric symbol of poverty and the Global South. The blending of "high" and "low" is executed through an asymmetric synthesis of European and Latin American elements: the exotic fantasy of harmonious (albeit unstable) mestizaje that the "negra rubia" embodies. Playing the role of "la sacrificada," it is the narrator herself who constructs the cumbia-villa architecture in real time: "Parte de la obra, una de las varias que me tocaban a mí, era un micrófono hipersensible conectado a mi nariz y a mi boca, era mi parte en la música. [Elena] escuchó cada pequeña alteración en mi ritmo respiratorio" (Cabezón Cámara, *Romance* 49-50). As the narrator is transformed into a work of art, a permutation of cumbia's unmistakable

rhythm emits from her respiratory system. Thus, in addition to an Orientalizing trope, cumbia is revealed to be metonymically embodied in villa architecture, part of the raw material out of which villas are constructed. Like *El rey de la cumbia*, *Romance de la Negra Rubia* suggests that Argentinian art following neoliberal crisis tends ceaselessly toward cumbia villera, and not only as affective economy but also as commodity.

Alejandra Laera suggests that what is at play in *Romance de la Negra Rubia* is a relation between body and money that marks the paradoxical condition of possibility for neoliberal art (and, indeed, art under capitalism more generally). Cabezón Cámara's narrator not only becomes "su mejor obra" but personifies, "casi literalmente, tanto la posible desfiguración del artista como su reconversión en un bien cotizable en el mercado" (Laera 10). Despite erotic and passionate descriptions of their love affair, the relationship between the narrator and her Swiss art patron is highly asymmetric and fundamentally transactional: "[Elena] se estaba muriendo y quería trascender: decía que no había hecho más que juntar guita en pala y comprar arte que no hacía. Ahora quería ser artista, quería posteridad y se le ocurrió montar su carita tirolesa sobre mis huesos de negra" (Cabezón Cámara, *Romance* 38). Moreover, the narrator falls in love out of, among other things, a desire to whiten herself: "me pasó lo que a tanto negro" (Cabezón Cámara, *Romance* 48). Although there is no evidence in the novel to suggest that the narrator is phenotypically dark-skinned (blackness indexes her poverty and burned face rather than her ethnicity), the ironic reference to whitening reinforces a relationship of servitude that recalls the role of slavery in consolidating global capitalism. Through the sale, the narrator literally becomes a commodity, human capital. She not only succeeds in "bringing art into her life," or rather, in bringing her life into art, but is able to insert her work and herself into international circulation. In reappropriating neoliberalism "from below," she mobilizes the calculus of her exchange-value to achieve liberty as an artist-activist, redirecting foreign capital toward housing security efforts in Buenos Aires, and finally, acquiring the time to write. The novel suggests that an artist's relationship to the market is always one of semi-prostitution; what matters is how an artist mobilizes the inherent asymmetry between buyer and seller.

Mariana Ríos suggests that, through a series of interlocking rites of passage (poet, martyr, "negra rubia," politician, writer), *Romance de la Negra Rubia* explores how performative writing can function as a "modo de resistencia a una lógica productiva" (Ríos). These "mutations," as Montes calls them, function through a series of exchanges whose oxymoronic character unsettles the traditional relationship between politics, art, and the market: "amante-amada, obra de arte-artista, yo-otro, negra-rubia" (36). What is most problematic in the relation between artists and the market,

according to Laera, is "la necesidad traumática de que el mercado exista y esté consolidado con firmeza, porque solo así, solo cuando una circulación desaforada de los bienes culturales acecha buscando el momento justo para absorber la propia producción, es cuando adquiere su sentido la resistencia a esa mercantilización" (11). Paradoxically, there can be no resistance to commodification without subsumption into the same modes of production the work of art might seek to evade. The neoliberal performance is not so much for sale as already sold, not guilty of selling out but eager to sell in.

Romance de la Negra Rubia closes with a long reflection on art and politics surrounding the figure of the martyr, which is worth quoting at length:

> Lo que es propio del martirio es volver al mártir signo ... Y para lo que he de contar no es en nada relevante la vocación de martirio: no importa si el sacrificio fue asumido como propio, si te tiraste del bote para que siga flotando, o para honrar a los otros que se habían caído antes o te arrojaron al mar sin volver la vista atrás, que pocos quieren mirar cómo mueren los que matan. Acá no importa el deseo: hemos de considerar santos a todos los que muriendo nos reportaron ganancias ... Pero antes de que la parca se me acerque a cosecharme con su gran hoz implacable, yo he de seguir hablando. El orden de los factores de cualquier memento mori termina por definir si es carpe diem o martirio, si es batalla o retirada, si es *fuck you* o si es sí jefe; saber que se ha de morir puede ser un buen motivo para andar de orgía en orgía o para entregar la vida en pos de algo superior; la Revolución, Dios, la Patria o no poder transar más, hablo de los que se matan o que se dejan matar y de los que no se dejan pero los matan igual, que no en todo sacrificio está de acuerdo el cordero, por nombrar un animal con tradición de holocausto, de bondad inmaculada y de asado en la Patagonia ... El mártir es el testigo según la etimología, que no garantiza nada pero dice lo que dice y dice que el mártir es quien vio todo hasta el final, pero en el final no hay nada apenas la propia muerte y de eso no hay testimonios … (72-76)

In Rancière's *aesthetic regime*, art "thrives" in the ambiguity where it "promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy" (*Dissensus* 33), in the paradox whereby "a new life needs a new art; the new life does not need art" (*Dissensus* 124). But martyrdom belongs to a different regime. It involves the conversion of a political act into the sign of a truth or a cause, an inaugural work of art for a new politics (or so Revolution and martyrdom have functioned in Latin America).[9] As a sign, martyrdom is closer to what Rancière (reading Plato) calls the *ethical regime*: "'art' is not identified as such but is subsumed under the question of images," which are evaluated according to their "origin (and consequently their truth content) and the question of their end or purpose … in what way images' mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities" (*Politics*

20-21). Etymologically, a martyr bears witness or testifies. But the martyr's testimony is silenced by her death, resignified by the cause her commodified image is made to serve. Like the T-shirts and hats bearing the image of Che Guevara that are sold in tourist markets throughout Latin America, martyrdom is marketing. Montes has published an insightful reflection on Cabezón Cámara's mise-en-scène of the history of martyrdom in this passage and the way it explores "el *uso* político que se hace de los muertos en su reducción a valor de cambio" (32). Here, the revolutionary promise of utopia disappears into the repetition ad nauseum of the image divorced from its cause. Cabezón Cámara poses the question of what happens when a martyr is condemned to live. What is the emancipatory potential of the post-crisis orgy, the bailanta suspended in cumbia villera's benign/offensive monotony?

As Gago puts it, "la dinámica neoliberal se conjuga y combina de manera problemática y efectiva con este perseverante vitalismo que se aferra siempre a la ampliación de libertades, de goces y de afectos" (26). Cabezón Cámara explained in an interview that

> el 2001 fue vivido de maneras tan diversas: para muchas personas fue una tragedia, para la mayor parte; para mí fue una fiesta, me encantaba salir a la marcha, después corría y me iba a tomar una cerveza… Me parecía divino eso de que ibas, te juntabas con un montón de gente, de gente rarísima, en el sentido de que antes no era normal juntarse con una señora cheta de Recoleta y con un cartonero todos juntos, todos contentos. Además nunca tuve ahorros, siempre me gasté lo que ganaba, no perdí dólares… había una cosa de efervescencia, una sensación de estar vivos, el encuentro con otros y otros y otros… ("Estamos")

Romance de la Negra Rubia reflects on this idiosyncratic experience of neoliberal crisis. It does not anticipate a "revolution to come," an ethos that had all but disappeared with the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989 (Rancière, *Dissensus* 201). Instead, it inhabits a space that is both a product of neoliberal crisis and also, paradoxically, prior to it: a bailanta where Arnold Schoenberg dances to cumbia villera.

In this paper, I have focused on two works of cumbia-literature whose intermediality enacts a critique of the neoliberal regime of art. Where the molecular, quasi-ethnographic detail of Cucurto's cumbia evaluates the potential of popular music to reappropriate neoliberal rationality from below, Cabezón Cámara's queer, oxymoronic kitsch disrupts received distinctions between art and politics. Both novels evince a deep-set ambivalence with respect to the political possibility of art in a neoliberal regime. As Prieto argues, these works "querrían ser algo más (o algo menos) que escritura: en ese algo más (o algo menos) se inicia el paso a una *poiesis*

política" (*La escritura* 45). By expanding their writing into music and performance, Cucurto and Cabezón Cámara suggest that literature is indistinct from the experience of the bailantas, from community *fiestas* that parody, exaggerate, and reappropriate neoliberal excess, from the calculus of bus schedules and artistic patronage, the liberty of orgies and commodification, the desperate promise of empty lyrics and musical monotony, the relaxed, unaccented rhythm and ambivalent irony of cumbia villera.

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NOTES

1 Menem's policies included the so-called "Convertibility Plan," implemented between 1991 and 2002, which pegged the Argentinian peso to the US dollar. Privatization was widespread during the period, as was capital flight.

2 For a detailed analysis of Cartonera publishing, see Epplin, *Late Book Culture in Argentina*.

3 In Cucurto's *Cosa de negros*, a character named Washington Cucurto is a recent immigrant from the Dominican Republic (see Ros 30-31; Bernabé 121-22).

4 The directness of cumbia's "visceral, obscene, and degrading" register places it equally distant from the *canción militante* of the 1960s and 1970s and the anti-status quo rock music of the 1970s and 1980s, where lyrics tended to employ metaphor and imply hidden, subversive meanings (Wilson and Favoretto 166).

5 See Kim, "The Secret Math Behind Feel-Good Music."

6 The trope of the Carrefour appears in several of Cucurto's writings (Ros 24), a reflection of the fact that Vega/Cucurto, who did not finish secondary education, himself worked at a Carrefour (Trajkovic 324). In fact, Cucurto would leave his Carrefour shifts not to attend bailantas, but to spend time in the library (Trajkovic 324). A library is a different sort of economy, based on borrowing and sharing rather than exchange, and Cucurto (who was eighteen years old when Mercosur was established in 1991) recounts reading and borrowing from poets of Peru, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, and Venezuela (Cucurto, "Tarambonear" 202–03). At the same time, Cucurto consistently rejects canonized Argentinian writers like Cortázar, Saer, Piglia, and Borges (Trajkovic 329), proposing wryly: "Si Borges hubiera conocido la cumbia y este país capitalista que se cae a pedazos. Por suerte se murió en el 1986…" (*El rey* 71).

7 Cucurto did once sign a contract with a large conglomerate, Planeta Emecé, to publish *Curandero de amor* (2006), but (after facing criticism) returned to smaller, local presses (Trajkovic 328).

8 Marcela Astorga is a Buenos Aires-based multimedia artist who focuses on skin as material, representation, and metaphor (Astorga).

9 Cuban writer and revolutionary José Martí, for example, aestheticized the martyrs of Cuba's Independence wars in his text "Los poetas de la guerra" (1893): "su literatura no estaba en lo que escribían, sino en lo que hacían. Rimaban mal a veces, pero sólo pedantes y bribones se lo echarán en cara: porque morían bien. Las rimas eran allí hombres. Dos que caían juntos eran sublime dístico" (207-08).

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