Gatas y Vatas is an annual all-female music festival in Albuquerque that started in 2010 featuring solo performances by local musicians. Initiated by young Hispanic women as an attempt to counteract the white-male dominance of the music scene, Gatas y Vatas has become a catalyst of female empowerment where participants experience liberation while defying gender norms in an all-inclusive environment. While there is a complete freedom in the style of music played in the space of the festival, most of the performers have engaged with sound experimentation that challenges any given categorization.

The literal translation of Gatas y Vatas is: “lady cats and gals.” However, this word choice contains cultural subtleties that should not be overlooked: in some Spanish-speaking contexts, “gata” is used as a synonym of a sexy woman, and a “vata” implies some kind of a tough gal, someone to be respected. Drawing from ethnographic research, in this paper I explore the festival as a space where each participant becomes a “gata” and a “vata” through the inscription of a cultural exercise of resistance and belonging. As Benjamin Piekut has noted, experimentalism is a grouping, not a group; not what is described, but what is performed as experimental.¹ I argue that the musicians associated with Gatas y Vatas perform a feminist experimentalism while embracing a gendered identity of a “burqueño pride.” While locally rooted, the festival is an alternative performance space for the configuration of a community of performers that contest issues of race, class, and gender. The result is a community-oriented

experimental atmosphere that has reached levels of inclusion and female equality rarely seen in experimental music scenes.²

The political rhetoric of Latin@ performance at the U.S-Mexico borderlands is one of contestation over social codes of the dominant U.S. culture in regards to race, class, and gender oppression. In this sense, the experimental practices of Gatas y Vatas should be situated within the margins of a marginalized community. From a marginalized position, the performative actions of the Gatas enact a de-colonizing emancipation, and at the same time present a counter-hegemony strategy for disrupting racial and gender normativities. The present study takes a de-colonization standpoint that counteracts the colonial subjugation of denying or ignoring intellectual and artistic contributions of those subjugated.

Gatas y Vatas has been primarily a festival for Albuquerque about Albuquerque,³ and its participants share a strong “burqueño pride.” Within the increasingly growing number of Gatas, I regard three as central to the organization and realization of the event: Marisa Demarco, founder and main coordinator, Monica Demarco, Marisa’s younger sister, and Tahnee Udero. The three were raised in New Mexico, have a mix-ethnic background, and more importantly, carry a clear identidad burqueña. The toughness of being a Vata for the Demarco sisters is a result of living in the desert, which grants them a psychologically open space for limitless creativity. Going beyond the timeframe of the festival, Gatas y Vatas has fostered an artistic and social bond among musicians carried out through a great variety of community-oriented projects all year long.

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² I came to Albuquerque two years ago, and while I share with some Gatas y Vatas a self-identification as a woman of color, a Hispana and a Latina, I do not consider myself a burqueña. I still embrace the status of a “newcomer,” and the fieldwork and research I have conducted in this topic has been very short spanned. In this paper I offer my particular perspective on the city and the state, which is both informed and partial.

³ While this has been true for the past five years (2010-2014), Marisa Demarco decided to relocate this year’s Gatas y Vatas to Seattle, WA (2015). This with the intention to broadcast Albuquerque’s musical talent and to prompt other cities to “place their women on stage.”
The Demarco sisters share an ambivalent position toward academic settings and oftentimes their creative work comes as a response to that ambivalence. For instance, in *Cardiac*, for voice and electronics, Marisa explores the practice of music students consuming beta blockers to dampen performance anxiety. She takes a beta blocker on stage as a performative act of resistance and protest, where she makes herself and the audience complicit. In that way exposes the anxiety disorders provoked by colonial modes of classical music performance through a performative act realized inside an academic environment, achieving subversion from within.

This type of subversion is also present in Monica’s *Las Hijas de la Chingada*, for voice and prepared piano—a piece centered on the feminicide of Ciudad Juárez. For Monica, the murdered women are not foreign; “they could be our cousins, our sisters, our classmates.”

Writing *Hijas de la Chingada* was to Monica a call for action. Whenever she performs this piece she raises donations for programs in support of the victims’ families. *Hijas* raises awareness of how human rights are ignored for nonwhite communities and exposes the criminalization and invisibilization of working-class women of color. Moreover, it calls into attention the intersection of gender subjugation with the cruelties of racism and economic injustices at both sides of the Rio Grande, hence standing against any adherence to essentialized views of nation-state borders.

Tahnee Udero’s creative work also blurs and subverts the normative positioning of north and south. When Tahnee performs she becomes La Curandera. She arranges her performing gear as an altar, with a variety of religious candles and idols, herbs, and *sarapes*—each object carrying within it a strong religious symbolism. As La Curandera, Tahnee repositions de-colonial

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4 Marisa Demarco, interview with the author, June 6, 2015.
narratives by recreating ancient rituals from before the institutionalization of the U.S-Mexico border. Following the belief that “noise . . . takes you to a certain place,” Tahnee recreates, through sonorous curanderismo, local topographies. Her album Born in Space is inspired by what happened in Santa Rita—hometown of Tahnee’s grandparents—a town that no longer exists as it was forced to move in order to expand an open pit copper mine. By granting sonorous and visual recognition to a lost community, Tahnee is critiquing U.S. economic strategies that have oppressed minorities throughout history. Her noise music brings history and geography to public attention and constructs a critical consciousness where witnessing produces power.

A palpable consequence of the network formed by Gatas y Vatas has been the radical increase of participation of women in the local music scene. In Albuquerque women are on stage now more than ever, thanks largely to this venture. While embodying a “burqueño pride,” Gatas contest the racist, classist, and sexist stance of the dominant U.S. culture. From the margins of the margins, Gatas y Vatas proposes a community-oriented experimentalism centered on female empowerment, and by doing so, extend an invitation for us to imagine alternative versions of egalitarianism in contemporary music discourses and practices.

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6 Tahnee Udero, interview with the author, June 5, 2014