National Alchemy, Transnational Technophilia, and Residual Resistance:
Peruvian *Chicha* and the Limits of Experimentalist Discourse
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Shortly after the turn of the 21st century Peruvian *chicha* acquired a cachet and an international profile that its creators could hardly have predicted. Once tied to the milieu of Lima’s working-class Andean migrants, the hybrid genre was reviled by white elites in its 1970s and 1980s-era heyday. Heard as an indiscriminate patchwork of sonorous cast-offs from various local and foreign musics, it was touted as esthetic evidence for an indigenous and *mestizo* inferiority upon which rested their claims to rule the top of the country’s social structure. However, after the gradual socioeconomic empowerment of the highland migrant community, and a consequent shift toward the discursive valorization of *mestizaje* (“mixture,” broadly construed) as an engine of integration and renewal, *chicha* came instead came to be described as the very essence of Peruvian character. Meanwhile, in a related development, international listeners too came to prize the style. Amid a generalized turn in the world music marketplace, away from styles valued for their cultural authenticity and toward hybrid experiments that disaffiliated from all forms of essentialism, *chicha’s* multifarious use of inexpensive electronics—originally driven by economic need—made the style retrospectively congruent with the technophilic modes of sonorous experimentation and consumption dear to the ideologues of “World Music 2.0” (Marshall 2009; Novak 2011).

In each case, the style’s uptake by new listeners relied upon the reconceptualization of its creators and their goals. Rather than everyday workers laboring against financial or technological barriers to generate simple music for everyday pleasure, *chicha* artists like Los Shapis, Chacalón y La Nueva Crema, Los Hijos del Sol, and others became organic vanguardists, exploding esthetic categories so as to secure the artistic and social liberation of their descendants. In this chapter, I trace the national and international circulation of this discursive apparatus and explore its limitations as an act of the political imagination. I ask how it forecloses options for evaluating music’s role in visibilizing that which is eccentric to dominant categories, and occludes the challenge of esthetics that arise from spaces that specifically eschew vanguardist experimentalism—even as it operates under the cover of respect and recognition to valorize the contribution of Peruvian subalterns to national and global culture. Focusing primarily on the Peruvian and international reception of the US-based band Chicha Libre, as well as two collections of early *chicha* music compiled by the band’s director, I trace the way that these projects entered into dialogue with various anti-imperialist and anti-essentialist projects, in ways that engage imperfectly with Peruvian axes of disenfranchisement that remain largely invisible to the ideologues behind such efforts. I ask on one hand how the notions of resistant experimentalism that have accrued to *chicha* support *mestizo* nationalist narratives in ways that delegitimize other possible visions of Peruvian nationhood—narratives of class and ethnic conflict that were once central to *chicha’s* public image, and which continue to inform the genre’s contemporary inheritors. On the other, I ask how the stories of laudatory hybridity that organize the fan base of “World Music 2.0” reify certain kinds of creativity as liberatory projects, in ways that engage poorly with the circumstances where such musics are made and consumed: indeed, by briefly attending to parallel registers of “experimentalism” that cannot be effectively captured or recognized by either the discourse of Peruvian *mestizo* nationalism,
or by the putatively emancipatory discourse of “World Music 2.0,” I show (following Taylor 2007) how “hybridity,” when mobilized as a distinctive form of authenticity, acts to delegitimize certain kinds of creative actors and their associated communities in ways that are at least as oppressive as the well-recognized discourses of cultural authenticity that they ostensibly challenge.