 Seeking a New Path: Pasacalle Activists
Practicing Culture in Villa El Salvador, Perú

CARLOS ODRIA / University of Massachusetts, Boston

Abstract. This article investigates the development of a novel communal art form called pasacalle that is associated with the district of Villa El Salvador on the outskirts of Perú’s coastal capital city, Lima. The main performers of pasacalle are youth of rural Andean descent whose parents immigrated to the city seeking to improve their lives. They belong to a community that has always existed on the lower rungs of Limeño society in terms of socioeconomic status and political agency. The genre of pasacalle, driven by drum music of Afro-Brazilian origin, has become central to their expressive culture while serving as a vehicle for solidifying communal bonds and resisting marginalization.

I seek a new path in this city
Where everything is money and evil exists
With the help of God I know I’ll win
Chacalón (From “Muchacho Provinciano,” a song written and performed by Lorenzo Palacios, aka Chacalón (1950–1994).
Every week on the dusty streets of Villa El Salvador (VES), an underdeveloped district on the fringes of urban Lima, groups of teenage musicians and other performing artists meet to practice circus arts and a unique brand of percussive music derived from Afro-Brazilian batucada. The genre in which they are involved is called pasacalle, a name carried over from its rural Andean precursor despite the radical transformation this urbanized form of the pasacalle represents. The pasacalle (lit. to walk along the street) originated in the Andes as a parade-like communal art form featuring European-derived brass band music and festive processions. It was adopted and ultimately reinvented by the pasacalle activists of VES in order to counter the near-destruction and collapse of their community, which had been ravaged in the early 1990s when key factions in a civil war fought by the Peruvian State, the Shining Path Maoist guerrillas, and other radicalized militias arrived in the district and attempted to destroy its communal institutions. Pasacalle activists have incorporated Brazilian batucada drum music and circus performing arts, such as clowning, juggling, and acrobatics, into the seminal Andean pasacalle ritual, in the process eliminating the melodic and harmonic elements—as well as brass band instruments—of Andean parade music of the Sierra region (Romero 2001; Olsen 2007; Turino 2008). In doing so, they have effectively transformed the traditional Andean pasacalle into a synergetic space for the strengthening of urban communal life. Here, I explore the processes and motivations behind that transformation.

The self-taught artists of Villa El Salvador, whose parents and grandparents migrated from the Andes and other rural areas of Perú, attempting to escape from poverty in the 1970s, albeit rather unsuccessfully, define themselves as “activistas culturales,” that is, cultural activists. They use the word “activist” in order to infuse their weekly rehearsal sessions with a sense of political weight and social purpose as they hone their drumming and juggling skills in preparation for formal pasacalle performances at civic festivities, political rallies, and fundraising events a few times a month. Their energy-laden and boisterous rehearsals have become a platform for the young activists to voice concerns regarding social inequality in Lima and a means to demonstrate to older neighbors that the VES youth can “do something” in response to the prevailing injustice. These are individuals whose life course has been decisively defined by the district’s history of political violence, instability, and poverty, and by the continuing ravages wrought by the vestiges of that history. As I shall argue, activists developed their unique form of pasacalle for the express purpose of countering negativity and strife, while galvanizing their community toward civic pride and sociopolitical agency. The musical dimension of the genre has been central to these aspirations and purposes, both by virtue of its sonic power and semiotic valence.
The main focus of this article is on how VES's pasacalle activists use their weekly rehearsals as platforms for the practice and experimentation of what I view as novel Andean modes of culture and sociality. I propose that these weekly sessions not only yield high-quality musical and circus performances, but also become a space for practicing routines that foster fluent modes of embodied communication. Moreover, I present a lineage that interconnects the aesthetic and ideological stages that have shaped the evolution of the genre. An investigation of this lineage will aid in the discussion of the ethical concerns that have informed activists’ continuous experiments with various artistic media. Ultimately, the contemporary VES pasacalle movement depends greatly on its practice agenda. As I will show, activists see the rehearsal as a communal celebration in which long-lasting familial relationships are nurtured through a sustained repetition of drumming and interlocking patterns. Pasacalle cultural organizations, which activists conceptualize more intimately as “families,” behave as cohorts that fluidly transform into social networks by means of self-enhancing bodily and instrumental routines. Within this context, the performance organizations provide young and underserved artists a sense of creative agency while compensating for the lack of material support and recognition that characterizes Lima’s prejudiced governmental organisms in disenfranchised regions such as Villa El Salvador. At several points, such issues are explored not only relative to the VES pasacalle case study itself, but with reference to other musicultural phenomena in different parts of the world that ethnomusicologists have researched in relation to similar ideological and performative issues.

Batucada in the Neighborhood

The music of the VES pasacalle is exclusively grounded in the sounds and textures of Brazilian-derived batucada percussion music. The term batucada was originally used in Brazil to “refer to the many different types of Afro-Bahian groups that paraded in [the city of] Salvador’s Carnival” during the first half of the twentieth century (Crook 2005:135). These “[b]atucadas were neighborhood-centered groups that formed among working-class blacks . . . and employed many of the Afro-Brazilian percussion instruments that were part of the samba schools of Rio de Janeiro (ibid.:136).” In Villa El Salvador, a similar concept of neighborhood-centered groups of musicians/artists has been created to sustain the communal nature of the pasacalle movement.

Nevertheless, while pasacalle activities in VES are structured on and within the performance of Afro-Brazilian percussion ensembles, which are commonly described by locals as “batucada,” “batuque,” or simply “tambores” (drums), the pasacalle should not be seen purely as an instance of cultural appropriation of Brazilian transnational diasporic development. In fact, as I explain below, there
is no clear consensus regarding the process by which the Afro-Brazilian tradition arrived in VES. The ambiguity regarding the practice’s provenance has led to a lack of rigid stylistic restrictions in relation to the “correct” way of playing tambores. Consequently, batucada players in VES approach the practice with a focus on its communal potential within the context of their invented pasacalle tradition rather than with an interest in producing a polished or “authentic” Afro-Brazilian sound.

As anthropologist Natasha Pravaz points out, even though a fertile transnational batucada movement has propelled the establishment of Afro-Brazilian ensembles around the world—in countries such as Canada, Japan, Chile, Argentina, and the United Kingdom—the “ethno-racial politics [of batucada music-making] are different for Brazilians and non-Brazilians” within these culturally-diverse locations (Pravaz 2010:212). Pravaz shows that Afro-Brazilian percussion ensembles outside of Brazil usually comprise efficacious platforms to “mediate specific socio-cultural dynamics with different significations, depending on the social milieu” of local practitioners (ibid.).

In VES specifically, the use of batucada has become an integral part of a strategy to strengthen and disseminate an Andean ethos of reciprocity and self-help. Lima is still a city marked by colonial prejudices against Amerindian cultures, and batucada aesthetics allow Andean and mestizo activists to express their pride as members of a distinctive (although disenfranchised) portion of the population. Notably, pasacalle activists mediate their Amerindian heritage through the use of a transnational practice they generally perceive as cosmopolitan, distinctively youthful, and fun. Amerindian practitioners feel in part that the foreign condition of the batucada allows themselves to distance their personas from a memory of racism that in Lima is expressed through a contempt and mockery of Andean folklore because of its rural and racialized origins. But, perhaps more importantly, pasacalle rehearsals and performances allow indigenous pride to be articulated by fostering “energía” (energy) among ritual pasacalle performers. Energía is an emic term used to describe the constructive bodily and emotional vitality that is generated within the various stages of pasacalle performativity. Pasacalle activists employ this term to designate a heightened moment of rhythmic flow, a pleasing or supple state that is accompanied by spontaneous, unrestrained, and sensuous corporeal movements in the context of performance. The condition of being spontaneous in the course of performance is therefore perceived as a crucial and liberating achievement. It represents a key motif and a heightened realization of community among VES activists. “Having” or “carrying on” energía is an unfolding state believed by activists to instill and construct personal resilience and to strengthen communal belonging within pasacalle families.
A History of the VES Pasacalle According to Arena y Esteras

The historical course of events that led to the adoption of Brazilian tamborres and batucada musical style into the VES pasacalle is unclear and remains a topic of debate still today. There is, however, one version of that history that has increasingly gained currency in recent years. It is the version that was presented to me by Ana Sofía Toguchi, the director of a leading pasacalle performing troupe, Arena y Esteras (lit., “sand and straw mats”) or AYE. This grassroots cultural organization credits itself with the invention of the VES pasacalle in the early 1990s, though that claim is contested by other groups. Such contentions notwithstanding, the following narrative, which commences with a metanarrative that I have constructed from different interviews I held with Ana Sofia, affirms a broader claim that is widely shared throughout VES: namely, that the development of the pasacalle was first aimed to bring the people of VES back to the streets after a period of traumatic political violence in order to reestablish the community’s economic system of reciprocity.¹

February 15, 1992. A death squad formed by members of the insurgent movement, Shining Path (SP), infiltrates a fundraising event held in a small building located in a sandy area in Villa El Salvador. Inside the building, a group of local activists coordinates the launching of a program intended to improve the children’s health and nutrition in the district. The SP squad breaks into the building and with their machine guns brutally shoots the communal leader María Elena Moyano, who has been leading the fundraising activities inside the building this morning. Moyano, an Afro-Peruvian descendant and citizen of VES, has devoted her life to social work since her teenage years. Her political legacy comprises not only the launching of this health program and a proactive defense of local women’s rights, but also leadership of a united resistance against SP’s military control of Villa. After Moyano’s execution, the shocked attendees watch in horror as the SP squad drags Moyano’s dead body outdoors to an open area and blows it up with dynamite. The brutality of this act is calculated. Its unforeseen violence complies with SP’s politics of terror, which envisions a shattering of all civic institutions in the district. Moyano’s execution sends a clear ultimatum to VES residents: “do not attempt to organize and make decisions by yourselves. Any effort to develop grassroots organizations will be regarded as an overt act of opposition to Shining Path’s war on the Peruvian state.” The assassination of Moyano accomplishes its political goal, eventually; shortly after she is killed, VES inhabitants confine themselves to their homes, fearing more deadly reprisals. With the entire community withdrawn from the public arena, the future of VES, a district whose economy is based on collective reciprocity, seems compromised. And so is the migrants’ chance to adapt and survive in the desert. In response to the siege, the people of VES retire in fear, their spirit broken, and their vitality and agency thwarted.
But in the midst of the strife, a group of self-taught young artists spontaneously organizes an enfranchising civil response that aims to reverse the damaging consequences of Moyano’s assassination. Later on they will call themselves “Arena y Esteras” in honor of the humble materials used by the settlers to build their shacks. Through literally “inventing” a communal art form that borrows from Andean pasacalle rituals and circus arts, AYE seeks to captivate the terrified neighbors and to bring them out to the streets. They improvise eclectic and boisterous street interventions that grab the attention of all children at home and, eventually, force their parents to take them out to enjoy the shows.

As Ana Sofia recounts, AYE was formed in the year 1992 by a group of teenage neighborhood friends who were shocked by the death of Moyano and felt compelled to help restore the district’s normal social life. Now a prestigious institution, that in 2012 won Perú’s National Cultural Award, Arena y Esteras ties its institutional roots to the very invention of the VES pasacalle. As Ana Sofia explains,

The most shocking image I retain in my memory is the funeral procession that followed the assassination of Maria Elena Moyano. There was a sea of people. Thousands and thousands of people, and we [the teenage founders of AYE] were walking behind them. And obviously, we were hurt. Then, in the midst of that procession, there was a moment in which my peers and I saw that huge sea of people that was walking towards the VES cemetery in the Vallejo Avenue. The Vallejo Avenue is a road that goes down the hill. Therefore, you could truly observe from the top of the hill the immensity of that procession. We stopped and sat down there, on some rocks, and there was a dreary aura floating around us. I was sixteen. I think the fact that we all were so young led us to utter one single phrase, automatically and simultaneously: “we need to do something, we cannot remain with our arms crossed!” Shortly after being part of the procession, we began to get together. We were very afraid, yes, but we still went out to the streets. We painted our faces; a friend of ours wore stilts. I slipped into my only yellow dress. My partner wore a huge mask, which he put together using egg box foam and paper, and he also grabbed a snare drum. We went out to the streets in that way, holding a placard where we had written a slogan reading “for the right to smile.” Our first destination was the central park of a nearby neighborhood group. Everything was so intuitive at the time. We absolutely had nothing clear in mind in relation to what we wanted to do. We just told ourselves: “Let’s do it,” this project. Simply put, we wanted people to come out of their houses. People were incarcerated, you know. They were afraid. In that way, Arena y Esteras was born (interview, 13 June 2013).

Ana Sofia introduces here the key elements that, in years to come, would define the essence of the VES pasacalle. Through this coming of age experience, activated by her participation in Moyano’s massive funeral, Ana Sofia and her friends developed the basis of an art form which, as she tells it, did not follow an aesthetic creed per se, but an ethical command involving the need to act cooperatively and experimentally. Shaping a musical practice first and
foremost in terms of its political and ethical desired outcomes is a strategy that can be found in other traditions where collective membership is imperative. For instance, in discussing processes of collaborative composition among the Anlo Ewe of southeastern Ghana, ethnomusicologist George W.K. Dor identifies a type of group creativity in which members of the community “come together to collectively express their communal ethos” rather than merely searching to meet general aesthetic standards, which they certainly do not disregard (Dor 2004:26). Furthermore, by maintaining a type of collective creativity based upon musical procedures, such as interlocking melodies and textural stratifications, the Anlo Ewe strategically seek to better interrelate as musicians in order to “reinforce communal allegiance and identity” in a larger civic context (ibid.:32–3). In the case of AYE’s political response to the social turmoil of the 1990s, reinforcing communal allegiance through music and ritual was also a primary goal. Therefore, in order to execute this goal, the members of AYE loosely adopted the traditional pasacalle as a flexible framework to put this response in effect and, ultimately, accomplish the ethical command of working together creatively.

As self-taught artists, AYE’s members incorporated their developing skills to create a type of street intervention that primarily focused on establishing a sensorial connection with the audience. The means by which they pursued this, which included their choice of music, choreographic routines, or costumes, was relatively unimportant. A vital aspect of the project, nonetheless, was their achievement of the attention-grabbing effect. The addition of circus arts and improvisatory musical idioms then aimed at rejuvenating the surface of what they considered an outdated Andean traditional pasacalle. During rehearsals, the AYE troupe experimented with different media: brightly colored clown costumes, painted faces, juggling routines, story-telling, puppetry, and with what they called “circus” music—an entanglement of pre-composed and improvised idioms borrowed from Andean parade music. Quique Valdez, an accomplished guitarist of Aymara origin and AYE’s musical director, explains the conception of pasacalle circus music in these terms:

I am a co-founder of the [AYE] group. I joined it in the year 1992. What happened is that I used to participate in the church parish of my sector. I was a member of the [VES’s] Youth Pastoral Care dioceses [which had] an interesting aspect: it sponsored a cultural program, something that other parishes in VES didn’t have. In that program, the youngsters were educated in the arts. They learned dance, drama, and music. All my friends were from there, you know. Ana Sofía was in the gang too. One day [after Moyano’s assassination], she told me, “look, I am putting together a group with some friends and I would love to have you in charge of the music.” We used to rehearse in the street, in front of Arturo’s house [Ana Sofía’s partner and AYE founder], or wherever we could find a spot. I remember we used to do a lot of pasacalles during those years, pasacalles that we called Escuelas Rodantes [Itinerant Schools]. We visited squatter settlements. We arrived to the sandy plains
wearing stilts and invited people to join us. And then, the kids would go out from their houses and we would play with them. We would teach them how to make puppets using disposable plates and wooden ice cream sticks. We would tell them stories. I was in charge of the music, and I used to play, you know, circus music. I played sounds that matched the walking. Sometimes, we would do the ritmo de Santiago, which is originally from Huancayo [a city located in the Peruvian central Andean range of mountains]. We always performed these festivals and used to visit many other places...we visited the most far-distant and poor places in the district (interview, 19 June 2012).

As Quique states, the ritmo de Santiago is performed in the Andean city of Huancayo, and more broadly, across the Mantaro Valley, an area rich in pasacalle traditions. The ritmo de Santiago is a duple meter march-like genre usually played to accompany religious festivities associated with Saint James the Apostle (Quijada 1965). As Romero (1990) points out, the Mantaro Valley area has produced a tradition of pasacalles predominantly framed by music that relies on melodic material and not on syncopated rhythms and interlocked textures (as the modern VES pasacalle does). Romero himself defines pasacalles as “tunes” or melodies “performed for the sections of Andean dances that accompany walking through the streets” (Romero 1995:10–7). His definition is crucial to recognize the radical change that has taken place in Villa El Salvador; the original pasacalle, an eminently melodic genre, morphed into an art form exclusively dominated by rhythm. Quique Valdez’s “circus music” still incorporated the use of melodic instruments such as the quena and trumpet to make idiomatic elements from the ritmo de Santiago more evident. Nonetheless, during the early 2000s, pasacalle activists found that this melodic material was still out of date and therefore decided to eliminate it. They moved on to adopt batucada drums as the only instrumental medium. In that way, leaders thought the art form could connect better with younger audiences and, in so doing, would refresh its attention-grabbing effect.

Yet according to several modern-day activists, the arrival of the batucada cannot be solely traced back to the work of Ana Sofia Toguchi and her friends. During my fieldwork, the frontrunners of several pasacalle organizations openly contested AYE’s narrative and stated that the real pasacalle tradition began with the arrival of tambores through other avenues. For instance, Carlos, leader of the Kataplum Suena organization, affirmed that activists learned batucada through the aid of an NGO that had a liaison with a group of traveling Argentinean musicians who performed and taught Afro-Brazilian drums in metropolitan Lima. Jota, leader of Intinya-Batu, believed instead that tambores came from Chile, a country in which batucada music and circus arts are actively used as an alternative space for the youth to experiment with diverse countercultural expressions (Duarte 2005:178). Other leaders, such as Michael and Omar from La Retumba, even stated that the brand of tambores used by VES activists is
actually not from Brazilian batucada but rather from “murga,” a Uruguayan tradition that incorporates a set of Western percussion instruments and a combination of “grotesque dancing” and ‘parodical’ use of well-known melodies” during parades (Trigo 1993:721). Finally, younger generations of VES activists affirm that the most influential resources for learning tambores are YouTube instructional videos that can be accessed on the Internet at no cost. Ultimately, the difficulty to establish a clear provenance of the batucada only stresses the cosmopolitan and experimental nature of pasacalle arts. Furthermore, the ambiguity of its origins distances the discourse of its development from notions of cultural appropriation that could be inappropriately used when tracing the pasacalle’s evolution. Instead, it is more useful to describe the emergence of this art form as a practice expressing neo-Andean identities made manifest through specific modes of energizing and liberatory sound and movement.

Despite the ambiguity regarding VES pasacalle’s origins, most cultural organizations still recognize their debt to AYE. Today’s activists also understand the pasacalle as a practice that fundamentally intends to captivate audiences, to destabilize given notions of tradition, and to awaken people from lethargic states caused by fear and oppression. The destabilizing element of the pasacalle is understood on the basis of local notions of self and community that reinforce the need for personal resilience among VES citizens. Similarly to the Zimbabwean performers of muchongoyo dance and music discussed by ethnomusicologist Anthony Perman, pasacalle activists may appear to enact “positive emotional experiences” through public performances and rehearsals in as much as these performances translate into semiotic “presentation[s] of ideal social relationships” based on communal reciprocity and fluid organization (Perman 2010:441). In other words, “the way [pasacalle] performance makes people feel is central to its political and social salience” because the heightened feelings this practice ignites (i.e., through its energía) are often embodied by activists as signs that have already “changed key aspects of local senses of self (having to do with community and political identity)” (ibid. 2010:444).

For this reason, activists often perceive the introduction of the batucada as a “natural” innovation that helped to keep the evolution of the practice on track. Furthermore, in addition to being a stylistic move, the adoption of batucada drums has a pragmatic side as well; the practicing required to master batucada music demands a stricter agenda of weekly rehearsals and therefore a more proactive and collaborative attitude from members to work as a team. Undoubtedly, the notion of “being family” while rehearsing tambores and circus arts has been strongly reinforced within cultural organizations through the implementation of batucada routines. VES activists find themselves more connected as friends and musicians because they now spend long periods of time working steadily to master batucada rhythms.
An Ethos of Reciprocity

The rise of the pasacalle movement in VES is a unique phenomenon in contemporary Perú. Activists have built a network of performers and cultural promoters interested in advancing the knowledge of a practice explicitly based on foreign expressions, such as Brazilian batucada and Cirque du Soleil-inspired arts, while maintaining under this aesthetic surface a prominent Andean ethos that molds from within the contours of the art form. In this regard, the activists’ primary means of action comprises a system of creative reciprocal exchange and mutual aid based upon regular street rehearsals. This system, I contend, borrows from the Andean concept of “communal work effort” or minga (Olsen 2007:44) in which aesthetic innovations are introduced through a participatory reciprocal exchange and negotiation of creative ideas (Tucker 2013:44). When necessary, the network of activists comprising nuclei of interconnected pasacalle families goes beyond their musical activities and provides assistance to members in need. For instance, activists perform pasacalles in fundraising events to collect money for medical bills. They also organize “marches for peace” to encourage the use of art-making as a tool to revert gang violence that afflicts the district (Abad 2006).

Figure 1. Pasacalle activists practicing batucada.
The implementation of this dynamic network also builds upon the ethical commands developed by the activists’ migrant parents and grandparents, who in the 1970s arrived to the peripheries of urban Lima. Seeking to take hold of the barren land and to prosper, the migrants established an “urban, self-sustained community” (CUAVES 1973) that colonized the desert in which VES is located today and resisted eviction efforts by Peru’s military and police forces (Coronado et al. 1996). During this period, migrants coming from multiple areas of the Sierra Mountains organized what was considered at that time the “most advanced model of popular participation and self-management [in the Americas,] a model of local organizing and viable alternative to a neglectful state” (Burt 1998:268–9). These Andean “pioneers” (Blondet et al. 1986) managed to adapt to the harsh coastal weather on the southernmost urban limits of the capital, next to the cold and stormy waters of the Pacific Ocean. They built a self-sustained squatter settlement through enforcing a set of ethical parameters that promoted collaborative work. Some of these parameters and beliefs derived from the pioneers’ common Amerindian rural background (Montoya 2010:484–5) and have been thereafter crucial in the emergence of contemporary neo-Andean identities in VES.
Today, Villa El Salvador is a still growing rural-migrant community with more than half a million inhabitants. Pasacalle organizations such as La Retumba, Kilombo, Intinya-Batu, and Kataplún Suená have emerged from the neatly planned but impoverished local residential units (grupos residenciales), which were built by pioneers across the district. These organizations maintain an active schedule of street rehearsals that keep alive—by means of their own artistic developments, communal ideals, and self-enhancing efforts—the ethical commands of solidarity and reciprocity laid down by their forerunners.

“We Always Come Out with Something”

The open sound of the tambores roars across the heavily congested Avenida El Sol, while members of La Retumba (The Resound) sway their bodies and play their drums with command and rhythmic drive. Michael, the nineteen-year-old founder and co-leader of the organization, stands next to me in the shoulder of Avenida El Sol and explains that La Retumba is not only a musical ensemble but a “true family” that wants to thrive (interview, 14 July 2013). He and his friends enjoy getting together every week to learn and perform Brazilian batucada. Learning tambores, Michael says, is a way to “avoid wasting their time in the streets” (ibid.). The members of La Retumba avoid “killing time” (haciendo tiempo) through unproductive, risky activities, such as joining street gangs, and instead take advantage of their free time creatively by rehearsing two or three times a week in order to be ready to perform formal pasacalles. During their preparation, they study different batucada rhythms by primarily listening to recordings or watching YouTube instructional videos.

As a cultural organization, La Retumba centers its activities first and foremost on weekly training sessions, which involve stilt-walking, juggling, and, of course, batucada drumming. Against the raucous backdrop of trucks, automobiles, and public transportation vehicles coming back from metropolitan Lima in the late afternoon, Michael raises his voice and explains: “We invest our free time doing these [rehearsals] because that’s a good way to distract the mind, to get rid of stress and negative thoughts” (ibid.). He and his friends are cognizant of the economic and social disparity that isolates Villa El Salvador from metropolitan Lima, where most economic and infrastructural resources are deployed. They are also aware of the related “negative thoughts” other kids their age accrue when confronting this inequality (ibid.).

To combat these negative thoughts, La Retumba organizes rehearsals that foster camaraderie and engage activists through energetic and fun music-making activities. For instance, twenty-two-year-old Omar, another La Retumba co-leader, mentions that his work as the group coordinator involves “finding the means for members to feel at ease in this space,” that is, in the practicing space...
opened up by the community of artists that form the group (interview, 3 August 2013). When using the word “space,” Omar is not only referring to a physical building or a designated rehearsal area, which, as a matter of fact, the organization lacks, but also to the activity itself that they carry out. Practicing is for him and others a celebration embodying “the site and the means” of a “transformative action” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993:xxix), by which they build safe environments and relationships wherever they go.

To illuminate this notion of the production of space through repetitive and self-enhancing experimental sonic practices in a different cultural context, ethnomusicologist Tong Soon Lee’s investigations of how Muslims in Singapore create a “sacred acoustic space [that] defines community” (Lee 1999:92) is instructive. According to Lee, the Muslim population of Singapore amplifies and broadcasts its call to prayer with the use of loudspeakers to establish a spatial organization of social life in public urban settings. In doing so, they materially and conceptually “inhabit” the sonic space and thereafter reinforce a sense of mutual belonging (ibid. 1999:89). Along these lines, ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny has pointed out that New Orleans second line parade musicians utilize the built urban environment to “create intimacy [. . .], maximizing a sense of unity [. . ., and] amplifying and multiplying the participatory sound” of brass instruments (Sakakeeny 2010:3). Sakakeeny affirms that during second line parades “the sounds of the music, the crowd, and the environment work together to orient individuals as a collective occupying a shared space” (ibid. 2010:3). Such shared space facilitates relations between performers and participants as well as provides a conduit for enacting symbolic acts of resistance against what are perceived as the segregating policies of New Orleans’ urban planners (ibid. 2010:5). Likewise, La Retumba performers of VES create a shared space by rehearsing in places, such as public parks, street shoulders, sandy areas, or in the middle of dirt roads. Their choice of location depends on many variables, including weather, neighbors complaining about noise, vicinity of other practicing groups, or risk of entering gang territory. “We always come out with something,” Michael says to praise the fact that his group is good at adapting and finding new areas for public rehearsals (interview, 14 July 2013).

Sometimes, La Retumba rehearses in small communal parks located at the center of their grupos residenciales. These parks, which were built by the settlers to provide neighbors with an assembly area for debating self-governmental issues and to celebrate festivities (Zapata-Velazco 1997), are used as the preferred practicing spaces for La Retumba and other organizations. The parks function as the fundamental hubs of social activity across VES and are always crowded with children and adults who meet to play soccer, chat, or hold fundraising events. La Retumba and other groups usually recruit new members in these areas. In a rehearsal carried out by the Intinya-Batu organization (Drums of the Sun) within
a communal park, I observed its twenty-one-year-old leader, Jota, and his friends working with a group of prospective members from around the neighborhood. Sitting and standing up around a bench, the members of Intinya-Batu listened to Jota’s instructions attentively.

Jota divided the cohort of actual and prospective members into two sections: one for practicing tambores and one for working on juggling. There were bystanders as well surrounding the players. This informal audience consisted of children and teenagers who would hang out around the performers, showing a mixture of curiosity and excitement. Among these bystanders was a male teenager, Julio, who looked particularly interested but shy enough to remain silent and distant. Jota started giving instructions to the tambores section. Drummers were expected to rehearse new breaks and transitions for a particular batucada style. Performers spread in a semicircle around the bench where Jota was sitting while making comments and giving further instructions. The focus of that afternoon’s session was to perform the correct interlocking parts of the various rhythmic patterns that comprise the style.

After Jota asked the drumming sectional group to spend thirty minutes working on the interlocking patterns, he stood up, delegated a provisional coach, and began juggling next to the drummers. At one moment, he stopped juggling and talked to Julio, the bystander who remained staring at the practicing musicians (see Figure 3, below). Jota and Julio had the following exchange:

Jota: So, what do you want to do?
Julio: I don't know. Maybe juggling. I have never tried.
Jota: Well, if you want to join us, then you should start with tambores.
Julio: But, I don't know how to play.
Jota: They [the other members] will show you. Don’t worry. It’s all fine (Rehearsal, 10 July 2013).

When Jota invited Julio to play the drums, using an authoritative tone, he was applying his position as a leader to open up a new space for Julio to become a practitioner and also a member of the family. Jota stressed, in this way, that even though Julio was a neophyte, he would receive instruction and guidance from his peers. In this case, becoming an affiliate of Intinya-Batu just involved Julio’s decision to try the instruments and to engage in a learner-instructor relationship with older associates.

The Outspokenness of the Drums

VES residents such as Julio usually become interested in joining pasacalle organizations when observing and listening to their older peers in action during evening rehearsals in communal parks. Nevertheless, as Michael points out, older residents living in the area regularly complain about the noise of the
drums. These neighbors, who are perhaps more used to the melody-based sound of Andean and Peruvian folk music, eventually evict young activists and push them to the outside roads. There, pasacalle organizations have to practice not only in the midst of deafening vehicular traffic, but also out in the open, where the air of Lima’s wintertime is cold, humid, and filled with an endless light rain. Under these circumstances, the endurance and determination of activists are commendable. While practicing, they maintain a strong resolution to keep up with the session. This resolution is reflected in the loudness of their drumming, which stays always high and mostly lacks dynamic range. “The potency [and] outspokenness of [the drum’s] sound,” Michael says, channels practitioners’ energía. It enables them to achieve a sense of self-actualization by “liberating their minds” (interview, 14 July 2013). This is why activists are convinced that tambores have to always be played loud, even though this “outspokenness” may hinder the chance of their group to gain recognition, or even acceptance, from older and more politically-empowered VES citizens.

Although not well received by older VES citizens, the outspokenness of pasacalle drums is a conduit of energía that can be described, using ethnomusicologist Steven Feld’s words, as a “metaphor that embodies the construction of a
cultural ideal for competence” among activists (Feld 1984:390). Feld, in describing the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea and their use of metaphoric descriptors to shape broad ethical/aesthetical principles, suggests that creating “hard” (halaido) music is consistent with a Kaluli ontology and Kaluli social conceptions of the self. The same can be said regarding pasacalle activists’ predilection for loud playing. Their performances have to be “hard” (i.e., loud), but also relentless and synchronized so their music can serve as evidence and achievement of “social competence, physical maturity, . . . control of energies, [and] ability to perform” that Feld’s sees in Kaluli sounds (ibid.). Perhaps more importantly, pasacalle performances are loud and relentless so as to become sonic representations that “invoke proper social strategies of resilience and innovation (ibid.).

The resilience of pasacalle organizations, which characterizes the relationship between its members, is embodied in the response to the type of challenge described above, where individuals need to stay together in order to find rehearsals spaces and continue their activities. Consequently, resilience, not just musicianship and technical ability, has to be practiced weekly. In relation to this strategic use of creative musical routines to increase cultural adaptability, ethnomusicologist Louise Wrazen points out that Górale parents in Toronto seek a perpetuation of their indigenous Polish highland traditions abroad by committing their children to weekly rehearsals that “provide a safe, organized activity offering some fun as well as an opportunity to cultivate skills like singing and dancing” (Wrazen 2007:198–99). Importantly, Górale parents choose music academies and instructors that concentrate on indigenous Górale music, which they perceive as their children’s primary heritage. Moreover, in these rehearsals, the Górale youth “explore but one of the many possible identities that they possess in a multi-faceted urban world” comprised by an indigenous Polish heritage and Toronto’s multicultural environment. Thus, practicing bodily and instrumental routines, for the Górale diaspora and for the pasacalle activists, becomes a means to re-imagine fluid notions of homeland and cultural/ethnic identity through ethically-informed performance (Wrazen 2007).

Such fluidity of the self-image is strategic and allows activists to tackle material and emotional challenges by igniting positive and constructive energy. For instance, in another rehearsal held by the pasacalle group, Kataplum Suena, players were forced out of a street roundabout by a VES municipal watering truck that expelled streams of waters over their clothes and instruments without warning. Members of Kataplum Suena, including a nine-year-old boy, were peacefully rehearsing in this public area when the vehicle assaulted them. In that moment, the members of the group started running out of the truck’s reach and across the street carrying their heavy drums. Even though they had been assaulted, I only saw mischievous laughter and knowing smiles brighten up their faces as a sign of the camaraderie and complicity they maintained in order to navigate the difficult situation.
Communities of Practice

La Retumba emerged in 2010 and comprises, according to its members’ own words, a “group of young talents who, seeking to promote art not only in their district but beyond, found the need to organize themselves.”3 As an organization, they “not only follow a cultural approach but a social one” that “seeks to develop [civic] awareness” believing that “art can prevent many of the ongoing social problems” in the district (ibid.). Its members have devoted their time to establishing a “community of practice” in which mutuality, shared meaning, and experimental identities take place around and within training routines (Wenger 2010). Etienne Wenger describes communities of practice as “social learning systems” that possess and generate “emergent structures, complex relationships, self-organization, dynamic boundaries, [and] ongoing negotiation of identity and cultural meaning” (ibid.:1). This can be applied to the rehearsal space generated by La Retumba, which provides musicians with the opportunity to feel as though they are members of a family united by mutual memories and feelings of belonging ignited by their passion for pasacalle arts.

La Retumba and other pasacalle organizations of its kind use different rehearsal techniques and media, but theirs may be seen as an exemplar of the genre and its practice. A typical La Retumba pasacalle practice session usually involves fifteen to twenty drummers plus additional acrobats and jugglers. At least three drummers are in charge of the fondos (bass drums or Andean bombos), which produce individual rhythmic patterns that complement each other in an interlocking fashion. One leader plays the repique (tom-tom drum) to mark the pace and indicate upcoming transitions or pre-composed breaks. Other instruments such as the tarola (snare drum) and the chapitas (shakers) are used to add timbral variety and polyrhythms to the overall texture of the chosen style.4 During weekly rehearsals, musicians spend time working on specific patterns. They adjust their timing to coordinate the various layered ostinatos and pre-composed cortes (breaks). This material is repeated continuously until performers reach a stable synchronization. Concerted repetition and progressive modification of behavioral/rhythmic activity is, in this manner, channeled into a harmonized stream of energía that allows players to become a functional sounding and acting unit. Practicing music together, in this case, becomes synonymous with solidary power and knowledge, a phenomenon that ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has seen happening in Andean panpipe ensembles as well; “moving together, and sounding together,” he writes, Amerindian panpipe players “discover and rediscover an explicit way of being together” (Turino 2010:93). Turino adds about this way of practicing togetherness that, “the depth of such moments [of sync] moves within and beyond the beauty and power of the sound and movement [and that] they are part of a much broader preparation for life” (ibid.:93).
Certainly, VES pasacalle sessions nurture meaningfully emotional non-verbal interactions between group members. For example, some affirm that what they most enjoy about being part of an organization is “the familiarity that [they] all share, the way in which [they] relate to each other” while practicing and “the music, the rhythm, the energies musicians put it when playing.” Moving together and sounding together teaches activists how to relate in ways that enable them to feel at ease navigating between individual and group expectations. For instance, activists complain about the difficulty of keeping up with the fast pace of some batucada styles. Even though they become exhausted, they also know that it is imperative for them to not slow down because this will certainly affect the rhythmic structure of the style. Regarding this common issue, activists believe that “we cannot reduce the energía of the performance even when sometimes we feel exhausted” because “everything [that is, the group’s ultimate purpose] is related to the energía you invest when playing.” As these statements show, notions of energía and space are conflated in activists’ discourse. Through an energy-laden cooperative music-making, they produce an intimate space, an arena in which knowledge in the form of knowing others is obtained. They gain the “preparation for life” necessary to act together in the face of a detrimental socioeconomic reality that, more often than not, crushes individual efforts to gain upward mobility.

Experimental Practice

During rehearsals, pasacalle activists undertake a type of “experimental practice” (Mendoza 2000:37) in which more than applied drumming skills and circus choreographic routines are rehearsed. Perhaps equally important for the activists are the modes of relationship and group cooperation that participants explore in order to reach their artistic goals. As members of families, they endeavor to strengthen their bonds. Practicing represents an embodied “symbolic interaction” that fortifies a united resistance to counteract isolation and poverty (Waskul and Vannini 2006:13). Through their cosmopolitan, attention-grabbing, and musically empowering communal art, activists sponsor forms of togetherness that rely on bodily and sensorial dimensions of human solidarity (McNeill 1997; Overy and Molnar-Szakacs 2009:499). By means of an internationally influenced art, practicing togetherness has become, in the long run, the activists’ way to resist the validated and discriminative policies of Peru’s criollo state.

As a brief driving tour across metropolitan Lima and its pauperized periphery would show, the criollo state greatly benefits Lima’s white and mestizo elite, who mainly reside in the wealthy inner districts of the capital. Criollo aspirations in life are influenced by Western lifestyles and the benefits of a costly private education.
These aspirations embody the very idea of progress endorsed by state policymakers. On the other hand, urban Amerindians whose cultural expressions move away from idealized notions of Western progress are left behind, unattended and concealed as an embarrassing sign of backwardness in the “belt of misery” (Lloyd 1980:vii) that surrounds the opulence of modern metropolitan Lima.

Concerted rhythmic action is, then, a political strategy. Pasacalle rehearsal techniques aim at mastering bodily coordination to build solid and empowering bonds. These techniques are also experimental. VES practicing selves reformulate drills and modes of personal interaction in order to foster functional cohorts. When working toward the assemblage of interlocking patterns, activists approach drumming drills with an “affiliative intent” (Dissanayake 536:2009) that brings players together as close family members. For that reason, pasacalle leaders tend to establish policies that promote fun, creativity, and camaraderie. Kataplum Suena’s leader, twenty-one-year old Carlos, jokes about the way in which he carries out his leadership. His fellow group members usually make fun of him during rehearsals. “As you see,” he says mockingly, “I am not a serious leader and that’s because I don’t want them to feel like they’re in jail. This is my second family” (interview, 3 June 2013). Carlos’ leadership encompasses a resilient attitude toward the affective and down-to-earth demands of his followers. He suggests that this type of friend/leadership position involves his role as a spiritual guide, a sort of father figure who situates himself as an adviser in matters of everyday life struggles. As such, he avoids been openly authoritative. On the pragmatic side, Carlos also excels as an effective administrator. He always maintains an unequivocal position as a leader of his ensemble.

During weekly batucada rehearsals, he divides musicians into smaller cohorts that work on specific patterns and cortes. Drummers work in duets, trios, and larger configurations. In a session held at a VES street roundabout, I saw older and more experienced players showing younger percussionists how to play batucada patterns. These older drummers transmitted their skills commandingly but jokingly as well, as if they both wanted to show off while reinforcing a sense of commitment and friendship. All the musicians that day, a total of fifteen, formed clusters that interacted collectively. Some members formed semi-circles; others regrouped into larger combos. Activists demonstrated a willingness to learn their parts by actively moving across the roundabout. There was a sense of pride and self-determination in the way the musicians continuously reworked the ensemble’s format. This subgrouping approach, which utilizes the rehearsal space creatively, works and reworks players’ relationships in the context of training activities. This, in turn, is a revealing trait of Kataplum’s performativity (Butler 1993); it helps to encourage a sense of suppleness and cohesion in the group while signifying members’ “affiliative intent” through interlinked corporeal movements.
By working collaboratively toward synchronizing each peer’s sway, Kataplum practicing selves promote a “muscular solidarity” (McNeill 1997:147) that overpowers the intrusive noise of the traffic. This solidarity leads activists to affirm that the true spirit of practicing tambores expresses in the peak “emotion” and “group energy” that is achieved during “fun, relaxing, [and] fluid” rehearsals. Bodies coordinate their intent to affiliate with one another and, through their own example of unselfish physical effort, teach each other the positive aspects of practicing togetherness.

Intimate bodily coordination allows for an even bolder, more outspoken group discourse by which pasacalle players redefine their place in a disenfranchised urban reality. Similarly to the Japanese American taiko drum tradition discussed by ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong, VES batucada drumming “opens up the body” for activists to reclaim a “larger personal space” and to provide “alternative ways of moving through physical and sonic space that are passionately appealing” (Wong 2000:75). Wong describes her own experience practicing taiko drums as one in which group rehearsals acquire meaning in relation to the “deep bodily implications” they furnish (Wong 2004:77) and not necessarily on the basis of the particular aesthetic or technical achievements reached by players during sessions. This is because taiko rehearsals, Wong writes, involve “a community of performers for whom a diversity of ability is a given” and, furthermore, the ultimate aim of practicing is the development of the “taiko spirit,” a construct she describes as “a set of values that includes a lack of ego or arrogance, the ability to work well with others, [and] putting the group before your own concerns” (ibid.).

Pasacalle activists maintain an analogous attitude in relation to their rehearsals. Their weekly street gatherings seek not only to master technical skills but, more importantly, to nurture a spirit of group cohesiveness and resilience as well as a sense of space intimately embodied in the mesh of activists’ intersubjective relationships. This construction of a symbolic space through learning and repeated/concerted bodily routines has also been discussed by ethnomusicologist Michael Bakan in his ethnography of Balinese students of kendang drumming. Bakan describes the preferred type of instrumental learning among Balinese students and masters as one that begins with “mimetic imitation” of rhythmic patterns but gradually leads to “the experience of trust” between players, which essentially constitutes an ethical stage in which the “true musical experience” arises (quoted by Rice 2003:81; cf. Bakan 1999:279–333).

Repeated bodily routines and mimetic imitation also constitute the stepping stones upon which the pasacalle communal ethos stands and endures. Furthermore, imitation and interlocking instrumental drills are actions that help to reclaim a space that is sensed as lost or forbidden within the larger political
arena of Lima’s unequal society. The act of repossessing the lost space manifests thereafter in loud performances as well as through the mobilization of energía, which encourages positive social interaction and strengthens the cohort’s political voice. “Batucada is an eminently physical activity,” Michael affirms during a boisterous rehearsal in the middle of Avenida El Sol (interview, 14 July 2013), while in front of both of us, La Retumba players keep working hard to interconnect their drum parts as trucks and buses roar across the street. In this way, they inscribe a musical dialogue that nurtures today’s training space with safety and mutual recognition.

Family Bonds: Practicing with Devotion and Respect as a Moral Mandate

For the Intinya-Batu organization, practicing is a means to show devotion to mutuality as an ethical command. In the words of its leader Jota, Intinya-Batu are a “group and a circle of friends who are [also] family, without masks and always original.” Intinya demands activists to observe certain guidelines that ensure the
healthiness of their familial bonds. For instance, Jota and older members of the organization expect all of their new initiates to maintain respect and dedication within all practicing activities. They see the rehearsal as a shared space in which knowledge and information are passed down for the purpose of enriching the social and emotional lives of each practitioner. Practice is, according to Jota and his friends, the activity that permits communication among members and, for that reason, sessions are carried out with a type of devotion that reflects the awareness of drum practice as a symbol of unity. “My perspective is that the talent of the youth has much more value than the pity and compassion outside people can feel for us,” Jota says (interview, 7 July 2013). Furthermore, “with practice,” he argues, “everything can be done” (ibid.). These statements were triggered by Jota’s concern about the presence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the district, which according to him exploit and endorse an essentialist image of the local youth as poor and powerless. Through this imposed and paternalistic presentation of the youth, Jota argues that NGOs profit from acquiring international donations. They seek to capture monetary support by forging a diminutive (one-sided) depiction of VES inhabitants.

Making an effort to avoid this type of essentialism, Intinya-Batu encourages members to value themselves as creative, hardworking, practicing individuals and not as poor and disadvantaged beings. By strengthening a sense of social unity enacted through everyday training, activists generate personal and communal value. They entrust themselves with the certainty that creative music-making done in the context of non-individualistic goals positions the group as a dynamic generator of cultural capital. This is why Intinya-Batu values practicing as a way to enrich artists’ social and spiritual lives. Their rehearsal space has become the means through which they collectively attain a sense of togetherness while contesting outside paternalistic views of VES youth as powerless. Furthermore, working collaboratively to accomplish rhythmic coordination in pasacalle arts is carried out as a fulfilling obligation that frames Intinya-Batu’s activities within the VES ethos of reciprocity introduced by the 1970s settlers. Thus, Jota finds it necessary to approach practicing as a moral mandate that interconnects ethical legacy with cosmopolitan expressions that he and other Andean urban youth are developing today.

“We Don’t Want Little Trees Playing Batucada”

Practice routines not only provide a conceptual and physical space for activists to construct intra-group relationships but also embody bodily praxes and particular “techniques of the body” (Mauss 2006) that seek supple states of movement. According to Kilombo leader, Pamela Otoya, embodying a state of suppleness characterized by a responsive emotional and physical stage demeanor,
constitutes a strategy to counteract learned modes of submission, conformism, and lack of self-determination that trouble VES youth:

We understand the batucada as a total experience of energía. It is, definitely, not only a musical experience. With this, I mean that we cannot have introverted musicians [in our group]. I mean, we are playing carnival, right? Ours are dancers-musicians, actors-musicians, different musicians. That's what we understand when we think about an ideal batucada player. Sometimes we see people playing [tambores] and we say, “Man, we don't want little trees playing batucada! We don't want stiff people playing tambores.” For this reason, in Kilombo, we mix drama techniques with music; we want to teach kids how to loosen themselves up. You have seen our kids [practicing]. They moved and danced. You could see them smiling all the time. That's real entertainment! You could see the guys smiling and having lots of fun, but they didn't arrive at the group like that. When they crossed our door they were not like that. They were kids that, while playing, would look fixedly at their instruments; they could not look at the audience. They could not even manage to be on the stage (interview, 3 August 2013).

The notion of energía deployed by Pamela encompasses the ontology of freedom and movement that characterizes an ideal batucada performativity. In Pamela's usage, energía depicts a type of pre-linguistic element associated with the spontaneous, unrestrained, and sensuous corporeal movements pursued by Kilombo's activists in their playing:

These kinds of things [practicing with energía] are crucial in a social reality and a nation such as ours. Our people tend to be repressed and closed. When deciding to introduce batucada ensembles into the pasacalle we reflected deeply upon this. We wanted our reality to change. We wanted people to get excited and to move around. Encountering the batucada was, for us, not only to discover a kind of folklore or ritual, it was a matter of getting acquainted with a set of codes that could be used to modify or to enrich our [repressive] local codes. . . . We implemented the batucada in VES, an art that expresses a super extroverted culture. And we did this looking to enrich [the ways of] our people. [We use the batucada as a tool, because] in VES, culture and art are always understood as a means to transform and liberate people. Here in Villa we do art because we feel that, ultimately, art-making would open opportunities for many kids, opportunities to foster developing communities (ibid.).

Pamela's idea of energía as a positive state refers more broadly to the search for experimental modes of sociality among the VES youth. Embodying the supple quality she describes conveys not only an aesthetic index, but also a social attitude ingrained in pasacalle-related arts. For this reason, Pamela ties the quality of “being stiff, closed, or repressed” in music and bodies to a present day, post-colonial reality in Lima. In her view, the pervasive criollo racial discourse that assumes white superiority has reinforced introverted personalities among Amerindians. Thereafter, the VES youth is in need of learning experiences that revert stiffness and promote fluid intra-group solidarity. In this regard, she argues
that the switch from the use of improvisatory Andean-derived rhythms previously used by AYE’s first generations of pasacalle activists, to the incorporation of Afro-Brazilian batucada was pushed by Kilombo’s goal of attacking stiffness. Arguably, this stylistic shift may have happened in the early 2000s, when the proto-expressions of the modern VES pasacalle still employed Amerindian bombos, snare drums, and melodic instruments to accompany dancers and walkers along the street. Kilombo co-leader Leonardo, who as a twenty-one-year old is recognized as one of the youngest masters of batucada drumming in Villa, corroborates this and affirms that music during this time was extemporaneous and contained rhythmic phrases loosely inspired on Andean music:

The first batucada [in VES] was done with Andean bombos, with drums that were collected here and there, with simple snare drums. And they [the AYE pasacalle activists] just tried to do music that way. That was the first batucada ensemble I witnessed when I was a kid. Arena y Esteras, I remember, used to have only queñas [Amerindian notched flutes] and bombos in their pasacalles. They played folk [Andean] music. Or, sometimes they had bombos and snare drums and improvised music following any kind of rhythm (interview, 8 August 2013).

Leonardo briefly describes here an instance of the circus music mentioned by AYE’s music director Quique Valdes. Furthermore, both Leonardo and Pamela trace the evolution of a movement loosely conceived first as reminiscent of an Andean sound that gradually was urbanized or modernized with the addition of tambores for the purpose of reverting stiffness and promoting fluid-intra-group solidarity. According to their view, the stylistic innovation was aimed first and foremost at distancing Amerindian and mestizo youth from learned forms of submission perhaps associated with the more traditional sound of the original rural pasacalle, which relies on melodic content.

Practicing Society and Culture: “All Life is Acrobatics”

Cultural practices such as the VES pasacalle express and embody the fluctuating nature of human experience. As behaviors that are performed in the immediacy of heightened circumstances, artistic, spiritual, and ritual modalities usually voice unscripted, perhaps unexpected, emotions and cognitions linked to the places and times in which people exist. Yet, even though cultural practices convey the unpredictability of human thinking and sentence, they also foster stable channels of communication, thus nurturing affinities that become essential for the construction of social environments. It is in this light that the VES pasacalle movement has become an active platform in recent years for practicing and fine-tuning strategic modes of mutuality and cooperation. The loose pragmatism that has characterized the development of the pasacalle, marked by a constant drive toward experimentation, relates to ontological notions of adaptability and reciprocity inherited from the 1970s VES pioneers who claimed...
and transformed the barren lands. Pasacalles ignite neighbors’ and musicians’ awareness of the need to keep the basic principles of reciprocity fresh and active.

By using the phrase “practicing culture,” then, I base my understanding of the pasacalle on notions of society, structure, and culture as ongoing constructions with no finalized outcomes, that is, as performed activities or behaviors that are repeated and varied endlessly in the context of everyday life, but also in the uncommon, heightened moments of rituality. A crucial premise in this practicing model is that variation and innovation in culture are always built upon previous patterns of human activity, sentience, and cognition, which, consistent with the self-enhancing and self-adapting propensity for practicing activities in any field of human action, evolve gradually into novel patterns of activity.

Practicing selves are not only found in music or sports. From birth, human beings are engaged in modes of practicing that involve repeated actions performed with the mind and body, activities that seek to find the most effective way of achieving certain outcomes. This self-enhancing characteristic of repeated action in the practicing model is what accounts for the variability that impels cultural innovation. Sloterdijk has explored a similar concept of practicing in a way that highlights the continuous process of reformulation and the correlated instability that characterizes the shaping of culture, especially when innovation is understood as the outcome of self-enhancing repeated behaviors:

In every performance of practicing, an action is carried out in such a way that its present execution co-conditions its later execution. We could say that all life is acrobatics, although we perceive only the smallest part of our vital expressions as what they really are: the results of practice and elements of a modus vivendi that happens on the high wire of improbability (2013:xii).

Within Andean urban cultures, notions of innovation and self-enhancement are also tied to an understanding of life as a constant “improvement of oneself” (Leinaweaver 2008). Practicing to not only become better musicians and jugglers, but also better neighbors, friends, sons, and citizens seems to be part of a repeated and varied movement framing VES pasacalle activities. In other words, pasacalle practicing has become synonymous with agency:

[I]mproving oneself is a material, social, and moral process that resonates among urban migrants in the Andean countries, and it is particularly meaningful for young people. Coming of age, for this population, represents becoming cognizant of the effect of poverty. Young people understand and respond to the imperative of getting ahead, which itself has become significant in the Peruvian political economic context (ibid.:66–7).

The cultural dynamism impelled by such notions of repeated self-enhancement in the pasacalle movement accounts for a neo-Andean ethos of modernity based upon the reliance on relentless innovation. When discussing Amerindian’s expressive culture, traditional folkloristic views of Andean communities have
usually “emphasized neat boundaries, internal homogeneity, and the general persistence of unique, shared dispositions” implying with this that “the very survival of the communities in question depended upon the maintenance of the habits they described” (Tucker 2013:58). However, as Tucker aptly affirms, Peru’s “contemporary indigenous imagination finds inspiration in sites ranging from local traditions to a global indigenous movement” (Tucker 2011:388). While the notion of practicing culture may imply the permanence of certain recurrent “habits,” it more emphatically insists on the supple political relationships that emerge in the context of performance, a type of sociality that “do[es] not oppose locality and globality” (Uzendoski 2010:39) but that navigates the contemporary world creatively and for the sake of endurance.

Andean poet Fredy Roncalla insists in this regard that the building of a modern Andean identity is in itself an impelling, dynamic, and flexible creative process. A neo-Andean mode of practicing culture and society, Roncalla argues, has emerged within the energized centers of the Amerindian diaspora, in places such as VES. Due to the macroeconomic inequalities enforced by the criollo state, thousands of impoverished Amerindians had earlier migrated outside the Sierra Mountains seeking new paths for economic growth, improved education, and racial legal equality. Those energized centers emerge fresh and anew from the fiesta ritual event:

If something has to be learned out of the displacement [and migration] of the Andean communities towards the metropolis it is precisely the form by which the fiesta always returns us to the center; it does not matter what occupation or ‘culture’ we uphold in the everyday world of the metropolis and its ‘Modernity.’ The fiesta defines a space of encounter within which we return to the center accompanied by our music, our singing, our dances, our quarrels, and our tenderness. It allows us to recharge our energies so that we can return to the fight, as a wayki would say [Quechua for ‘brother’ or ‘friend’]. But it does so because [the fiesta] enables us to transcend the official and immediate levels of our everyday tasks. In that way, it breaks with the obsolete paradigm that sanctions a clear-cut division between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ (Roncalla 1988:62).

Within the pasacalle movement, practicing has become the recurrent energy center in which activists break with “obsolete paradigms” dominated by fear and oppression. It is through the aid of self-enhancing choreographic movement that the fiesta provides a space and platform for activists to reformulate folklorists and paternalistic notions of Andean culture that limit their creative potential.

**Conclusion: Seeking a New Path**

In neo-Andean expressive culture, breaking with those “obsolete paradigms” means that migrants ought to confront deterministic views of Andeans sanctioned by the criollo ruling elite (Cadena 2007 and 2010). Such views depict migrants as needy and incompetent, as uneducated peasants who are lost in a primordial
past. To contest these views, migrants have developed in Lima: 1) an expressive culture that aesthetically moves away from what is deemed traditionally Andean in terms of visual and sonic codes and 2) an informal economic/legal system that functions parallel to the state’s official apparatus. Soto described this parallel system as “the other path” paved by migrants to ensure survival and progress in the capital city (1989). In this regard, the VES pasacalle movement’s search for innovation and its reworking of identity through practicing activities can be tied to the massive Lima-based *chicha* movement that took shape during the 1980s (Quispe Lázaro and Portocarrero 1993; Romero 2002, 2007; Turino 2008). Even though this movement dissipated before the inception of the VES pasacalle, both are linked together by a similar experimental quality, as well as in their respective efforts for social justice and communal solidarity among Amerindian migrants.

Chicha comprised an amalgam of novel visual imagery, dance, and poetry developed by Lima’s poor workers and converged in the public performance of music combining Andean melodies, Afro-Caribbean rhythms, and elements of rock. Chicha does not share major aesthetic characteristics with the drum-based music of the VES pasacalle. Yet it draws from the same spirit and motivations. It is thus fitting to draw a close here through the invoking of arguably the most iconic of all chicha songs: “Muchacho provinciano” (A Guy from the Province), by Lorenzo Palacios, AKA Chacalón (Big Jackal). Indeed, it was a key line of text from the song’s lyric—“I seek a new path in this city”—that inspired the title of this article. That line forms the foundation of the epigraph as well, and is fleshed out in its lyric context below. Drawing from the migrants’ common experience of struggle and marginalization in Lima, as well as their urgent desire to improve their lives through communal solidarity, Chacalón wrote:

Soy muchacho provinciano  I am a guy from the province
Me levanto muy temprano  I get up every day very early
Para ir con mis hermanos  To go out with my brothers
Ayayay a trabajar  Ayayay to work
No tengo padre ni madre  I don’t have a father or a mother
Ni perro que me ladre  I don’t even have a dog to bark at me
Solo tengo la esperanza  I only have the hope
Ayayay de progresar  Ayayay to improve my life
Busco un nuevo camino en esta ciudad  I seek a new path in this city
Donde todo es dinero y hay maldad  Where everything is money and evil exists
Con la ayuda de Dios se que triunfaré  With the help of God I know I’ll win
Y junto a ti mi amor feliz seré  And together with you, my Love, happy we’ll be
Feliz seré  Happy we’ll be oh oh
Feliz seré  Happy we’ll be oh oh?

“Muchacho provinciano” poignantly expresses the ideals and preoccupations that engrossed Chacalón’s generation of Amerindians in Lima. It may also be
seen to poetize the sentiments of today’s VES activists. The brand of pasacalle they practice entangles participants within organic webs of relationships and sentiments that co-create a “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2011), that is, a sense of communal belonging, while simultaneously opening up spaces for experimentation with different constructs of cultural identity. Cultural activists in VES practice not only for the sake of refining musicianship, but also to seek paths for self-actualization, happiness, and political empowerment, as their parents and grandparents did. As Chacalón used to sing, activists keep practicing in order to “improve life.” Their organizations celebrate rehearsals as avenues for communication and upward mobility. In a city where empowered criollo minorities have shut the doors on noncomplying cultural expressions that navigate outside of given notions of Western modernity and folkloristic indigeneity, VES activists walk along paths that do not lead to pre-planned destinations. Instead, they walk and drum to experience the liberating joy of practicing together.

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Notes

1. I wrote the following vignette informed by several conversations and formal interviews I held with Ana Sofia Toguchi throughout two fieldwork seasons in Villa El Salvador (2011 and 2013). Additionally, some contextual elements come from my analysis of recorded interviews and YouTube videos that the AYE organization has posted on the World Wide Web to promote their social work.

2. All the interviews and activists’ statements included in this article were conducted in Spanish. Their translation into English is my own.


4. I have chosen not to discuss here details pertaining the specific styles used in VES batucada. The fluidity and experimental quality of the pasacalle movement itself, which constantly reinterprets and modifies original batucada patterns, renders problematic to establish clear-cut characteristics to distinguish these various rhythms.

5. Unless noted otherwise, these and the following activists’ statements are taken from an anonymous questionnaire I distributed among pasacalle activists from different cultural organizations between June–August 2013.


7. My translation.
References