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doi: 10.1017/S1478572224000203

On Censorship, Silence, and Rubble: Reflections on the Destruction of a Performance Venue in Mexico City

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Abstract

This article reflects on a little-told story of musical and cultural censorship: the Mexican government's 1996 destruction of the Foro Abierto, a 2,000-seater auditorium in the heart of Chapultepec Park in Mexico City. The Foro Abierto was the home of an anarchist theatre group called CLETA, and was an important venue for a number of genre-crossing musicians. This venue was destroyed by the police just before CLETA was to inaugurate it as part of the rebel Zapatista movement. Several days later, a musician from CLETA was assassinated. Responding to the material turn in music studies, this article combines ethnographic and archival research to explore articulations between rubble and censorship. The venue's destruction disempowered and disarticulated CLETA, to the extent that an unsettling silence emerged about this act on the site of the venue itself. Equally, constructive responses to the complexities of censorship may also emerge from acts of material and ideational de-structuration.

In April 2013, I attended a cultural event held at the Foro Abierto (Open Forum) at the Casa del Lago (Lake House) in Mexico City's Chapultepec Forest, a venue a short walk from Los Pinos, then the official presidential residency. It was held to celebrate forty years since the founding of the Free Centre for Theatrical and Artistic Experimentation (CLETA), a radical anarchist performance collective created in the 1970s by students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Here, amid music, dance, and theatre, I encountered striking images of censorship from 1996: a 1,500-capacity open-air auditorium, which had previously existed on this site, turned into rubble by bulldozers and pickaxes wielded by the federal police.

Images of the rubble were presented on a poster placed around the performance area, a temporary stage, accompanied by other pictures of the venue full with young audience members, and several announcements for cultural events that had been held there over decades. At the back of the stage, a banner was held up declaring 'We Demand Reconstruction', foregrounding the repressive histories carried in the rubble beneath our feet. Participants at

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This article is dedicated to the memory and creativity of Enrique Cisneros and Joel Ramírez, and to the history and present of CLETA. The author wishes to thank all of the CLETA members who participated in this study. The research for this article was carried out with the support of a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship (ECF-2017-159), for which the author is very grateful.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this event also told me how, a few days afterwards, a member of CLETA, a musician called Joel Ramírez 'El Chuco', was shot dead by gunmen in Sinaloa, an act they interpreted as an extension of government repression against the group.

During this event, histories of ruination, censorship, and repression resonated together through onstage musical performance. One act, an ensemble consisting of four singers and a ukulele performing covers of *nueva canción* and *nuevo canto* songs, called for the audience to resist privatization and support public, accessible cultural spaces. They followed this speech with a cover of Quilapayún's 'La muralla' (The Wall) which, based on the poem of the same name by Nicolás Guillén, plays on notions of the shared material construction of boundaries ('To the friend's heart, open the wall / poison and dagger, close the wall / myrtle and peppermint, open the wall / to the serpent's tooth, close the wall').[1] After their performance, the announcers emphasized the self-managed and publicly accessible nature of CLETA's activities: 'nobody pays us, we do this because we like this kind of work, this kind of space, open for the whole public'. Describing the range of community-focused arts activities carried out by CLETA, they characterized this space as a 'seedbed' for popular organization carried out in order to 'conscientize' and 'sensitize' the public.

The space's ruined past thus hung over this event, conditioning certain affective flows and helping to frame musical performance. It was displayed in onstage images which communicated that this was a precarious, contested site; and it was reflected in performers' frequent allusions to histories of censorship, and their denunciations of intertwined media and political power. Yet outside of CLETA itself, few now remember the old Foro Abierto. In the extensive, green grounds of the Casa del Lago, the absence of the auditorium is no longer noted.

In this article I reflect on the unsettled affects of this rubbled venue, informed by research carried out since 2013. Throughout this time, during a number of extended stays in Mexico carried out to conduct research into music, activism, and censorship, I have held in-depth interviews with over twenty CLETA members and collaborators, and attended many CLETA events. I have also conducted archival research in the Hemeroteca Nacional de México, in a small community archive located in the northern district of Ecatepec, and in private collections of some CLETA members. As a researcher from the United Kingdom, I have experienced these diverse means of encountering CLETA as richly insightful about Mexico's past and present. At the same time, my objectives throughout the majority of this period have rarely been to investigate this particular site. Rather, the traces of this rubble have been revealed indirectly, as I have moved through this site during research engagements with several different groups. I intend, here, to provide an account of the overlapping iterations and understandings of repression, censorship, and silencing encountered on the Foro Abierto, centred on the destruction of the venue itself.

Silencing matters in Mexico City

The main act of this article is what CLETA's members would understand as an act of 'recuperation' or 'rescue' (*rescate*): I present a history of what, I consider, ought to be remembered

1 All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as an ignominious chapter in Mexico's repressive past. It has often been observed that, by the end of the twentieth century, Mexican protest cultures had become musically diverse, inclusive of traditional and transnational musical genres.[2] Thus, my first argument relates to Mexican cultural history: I show that (a) CLETA, and the Foro Abierto, was a key performance context in which this increased expressive diversity emerged. Yet I have two further objectives in mind. I argue for (b) an understanding of the censorship of music as a crisis of voice; and (c) an understanding of 'voice' as a multiply constituted entity comprising sound, bodies (both individual and collective), political expression, and material infrastructure.[3]

Anthropologists have long paid critical attention to ruins, both through ethnographic engagements with ruins as sites for new affects and contestations,[4] and in a post-apocalyptic turn within anthropology which explores artistic activities as practices of world-making in ruins.[5] Concomitantly, there has been a recent turn in music studies towards exploring material infrastructures,[6] including recently published work which takes rubble as a central context for musical creativity.[7] Yet the material turn clashes with most of our received stories about music censorship, which tend to reflect abstract concepts central to the liberal political tradition, such as freedom of thought and expression, deprivations of liberty, and the counterposition of democracy and dictatorship. Often, music censorship also mirrors the 'musical work' episteme: culturally familiar notions of musical autonomy prime us to take music censorship as a super-structural, non-material occurrence. As a result, it is arguable that writing on music censorship has paid inadequate attention to how material scarcity and deprivation intersect with patterns of censorship of musical expression.[8]

2 See Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 256–7.

3 Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism* (London: Sage, 2010); Laura Kunreuther, 'Sounds of Democracy: Performance, Protest, and Political Subjectivity', *Cultural Anthropology* 33/1 (2018); Katherine Meizel, 'A Powerful Voice: Investigating Vocality and Identity', *Voice and Speech Review* 7/1 (2011).

4 Joost Fontein, 'Graves, Ruins, and Belonging: Towards an Anthropology of Proximity', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17/4 (2011); Leigh Bloch, 'Animate Earth, Settler Ruins: Mound Landscapes and Decolonial Futures in the Native South', *Cultural Anthropology* 35/4 (2020); Ann Stoler, 'Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination', *Cultural Anthropology* 23/2 (2008).

5 For instance, see Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

6 Kyle Devine and Alexandra Boudreault-Fournier, eds., *Audible Infrastructures: Music, Sound, Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

7 Abby Anderton and Martha Sprigge, 'Hearing the Musical Resonances of Catastrophe', *Twentieth-Century Music* 19/2 (2022).

8 See Patricia Hall, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), which overwhelmingly focuses on the censorship of musical texts, although some entries explore the effects of colonialism on the body (e.g., see Guillermo Wilde, 'The Sounds of Indigenous Ancestors: Music, Corporality, and Memory in the Jesuit Missions of Colonial South America', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. Hall, 87–108). A special issue of the journal *Popular Music and Society* focuses on musical expression, the role of music scenes in facilitating dissent, and on cases of self-censorship. Anne Kirkegaard and Jonas Otterbeck, 'Introduction: Researching Popular Music Censorship', *Popular Music and Society*, 40/3 (2017). At the same time, Daughtry points towards materiality in

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Censorship occupies a divisive fault line upon which liberalism has, in recent years, come to fragment. It is a significant constitutive outside for liberal democracy, which defines itself 'by opposition to a certain figure of censorship now relegated to a pre-democratic past, or to a non-democratic elsewhere'.[9] The critical literature on censorship and the arts has, in recent years, begun to challenge the straightforward portrayal of censorship as the state-led restriction of speech. Within the framework of so-called 'new censorship theory',[10] censorship has been recast as a force which is productive of subjectivities and certain kinds of expression. This viewpoint finds resonances in popular discourse through the so-called 'Streisand effect', through which attempts to censor a given speech act amplify it. In short, the traditional view of censorship as *restrictive* is complemented by another vision through which censorship is understood as *productive*, catalyzing novel forms of expression and action.

In turn, attending to materiality becomes especially vital when translating these conversations to Latin American contexts. As Michael Birenbaum Quintero points out in the case of Colombia, the presumptions of the liberal public sphere – particularly the assumption of universal speech and voice – are often out-of-place within Global South experiences, where it may be impossible to extricate 'speech' from volume, loudness, matter, and violence.[11] Ethnographic accounts of Mexico City suggest similar conclusions. In Kelley Tatro's exploration of Mexico City's punk scene, the production of a screamed 'voice' highlights the physical limitations of the body, and live events are taken as a chance to produce what is understood as 'hardness' against an insecure, hostile city.[12] Ana Lidia Domínguez Ruiz argues that noise problems in Mexico's capital expose challenges of peaceful coexistence and the 'art of living in society'.[13] The long-standing CLETA slogan 'Even the birds with the sweetest song defend their liberty with their talons', taken from a poem by Guatemalan *guerrillero* Otto René Castillo, suggests that revisiting the separation between speech, matter, and violence is not trivial, but is central to understanding the ways that censorship against this group has tended to operate.

The destruction of the Foro Abierto also tells us about how to connect music censorship, matter, and history. This story has unfolded over decades, through which the surrounding context has been culturally and materially transformed. CLETA was founded by university students in 1973, in the midst of a wave of state repression against the student movement

suggesting that '[c]ensorship of music, and, more broadly, silencing of voices (by killing, imprisonment, or marginalization) can be understood palimpsestically'. J. Martin Daughtry, 'Acoustic Palimpsests and the Politics of Listening', *Music and Politics* 7/1 (2013), 25.

9 Mathieu Candea, 'Silencing Oneself, Silencing Others. Rethinking Censorship Comparatively [Introduction]', *Terrain. Anthropologie & Sciences Humaines* 72 (2019).

10 Matthew Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After', *History and Theory* 54/1 (2015).

11 Michael Birenbaum Quintero, 'Loudness, Excess, Power: A Political Liminology of a Global City of the South', in *Remapping Sound Studies*, ed. Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 145–6.

12 Kelley Tatro, *Love and Rage: Autonomy in Mexico City's Punk Scene* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2022).

13 Ana Lidia Domínguez Ruiz, 'Vivir juntos, vivir con otros: proximidad sonora y conflicto social', *LIS Letra. Imagen. Sonido. Ciudad Mediatizada* 15 (2016), 143.

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and young people, justified by the self-appointed role of the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) as enforcer of 'national unity'. Mexico City for the first few years of CLETA's existence was notorious for systemic police beatings, torture, and impunity under the authoritarian rule of police chief Arturo Durazo;[14] but the group also clung on to the Foro Abierto through Mexico's turn to neoliberalism in the 1980s, as the authoritarian state threw its weight behind attempts to privatize publicly accessible venues. The venue was destroyed in 1996, following open rebellion in southern Mexico, just before seventy-one years of single-party PRI rule came to an end. At the point that I encountered it, in 2013, the group's members sought to keep the memory of the fragmented venue alive, at a time when the authoritarian legacy of single-party rule still haunted Mexico's multiparty system.

The act of historical 'recuperation' posited here thus affords reflection on the unsettled cultural histories of late twentieth-century Mexico, about which metaphors of material undoing abound. At the time that the Foro Abierto was destroyed, scholars were using the notion of 'fragmentation' to come to terms with the late century collapse of the Mexican post-revolutionary dream, characterized by developmentalism, authoritarian patriarchy, and cultural nationalism. Gilbert Joseph et al., for instance, used the term 'fragments of a golden age' to describe this collapse;[15] Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, in turn, sought to reckon with 'cultural fragmentation' without positing disunity or the loss of identity.[16] In the context of Mexico City, scholars saw especially close connections between ruination and popular culture: in the mid-1990s, the anthropologist Nestor García Canclini understood declining attendance at public shows in Mexico City as a consequence of rapid urban expansion, leading to simultaneous social disintegration and degradation of the urban environment. In everyday experience, he wrote, Mexico City now revealed 'only fragments, outskirts, locations determined by a myopic perception of the whole'.[17] Notably, García Canclini's narrative about urban disintegration is summarized by an excursion into popular culture: he emphasizes how the organizers of the Festival of Mexico City, who in seeking cohesion among 'the cultivated and the popular, the Mexican and the foreign',

> encountered hisses from rock fans when the romantic music of Marco Antonio Muñiz was announced and found that many lovers of ballet or traditional indigenous music denied the legitimacy of including rock in the same program.[18]

It is nonetheless important that in many notable instances, Mexico City's inhabitants have responded to rubble through constructive acts to build voice. The earthquake of 1985, which left a death toll of ten thousand people and hundreds of thousands homeless, has

14 Vanessa Freije, *Citizens of Scandal: Journalism, Secrecy, and the Politics of Reckoning in Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 107ff.

15 Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, eds., *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

16 Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, 'Concepts for the Study of Regional Culture', *American Ethnologist* 18/2 (1991), 209.

17 Nestor García Canclini, 'Mexico: Cultural Globalization in a Disintegrating City', *American Ethnologist* 22/4 (1995), 748.

18 García Canclini, 'Mexico: Cultural Globalization', 751.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

often been cast as a catalyst for popular mobilization against the single-party rule of the Revolutionary Institutional Party, and the emergence of civil society.[19] The emergence of the influential ska band Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del Quinto Patio was influenced by the popular mobilization arising in the ruins left by the earthquake;[20] many popular music venues were further established after 1985, in venues left empty by fleeing middle-class business owners. These histories indicate that García Canclini's narrative of material and cultural disintegration may be recast as one of salvage; the manifestation of agency in response to disintegration.

Such expressions of agency point to scholarly response-abilities: what does it mean to attempt the task of listening to, through, and around rubble? García Canclini seems unable to sit with rubble, obliged instead to seek some kind of 'solution' to it: his concluding gesture finds coherence among urban fragmentation, positioning it as the consequence of the reorientation of the city as a node connecting Mexico to global markets. In other words – writing at a particular historical juncture – García Canclini ultimately suggests that with enough distance one may perceive urban fragmentation as the byproduct of the transition from one grand narrative (nationalism) to another (globalization). In exploring the destruction of the Foro Abierto, I propose an informed scepticism about such narrative distance, suggesting that scholarly response-ability to rubble must imply more localized and particular acts of narrative salvage. This response-ability requires an open-ended approach to history which disarticulates stories about censorship from ideological or narrative 'superstructures', and focuses on individual and group agency. Rubble – a mass of unconnected material – affords attempts to trace ordinary affects as 'disparate scenes and incommensurate forms and registers; a tangle of potential connections'.[21] Stories about censorship-as-rubble snowball, accumulating momentum across boundaries of genre and historical narrative; and they constantly pose questions about scale, parts, and postulated 'wholes'.

CLETA from the 1970s to the early 1990s

The history of CLETA is intertwined with the Dirty War era in Mexico, in which the regimes of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–70) and Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970–6) violently repressed the diverse movements militating in opposition to the Revolutionary Institutional Party.[22] The Mexican Left was divided during this time between students, non-university-educated young people, workers' organizations, and more radical leftist factions, some of which formed *guerrillas*. CLETA was born in 1973 at a historical juncture during which the middle classes

19 Carlos Monsiváis, '*No sin nosotros': los días del terremoto 1985–2005*, *vol. 1* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2005).

20 The band's singer, Roco Pachukote, later stated how victims of the earthquake 'began to call groups, both dance and music, to hold cultural events in the camps, on the streets. There we saw that Maldita Vecindad had an audience and a scene that we could really dialogue with . . . in the context we had dreamed of: the street. The street next to the camps, next to children, women, and everything.' 'La historia de La Maldita, ligada al terremoto', *Chilango*, 18 September 2015, www.chilango.com/musica/la-historia-de-la-maldita-esta-totalmente-ligada-al-terremoto-roco-pachukote/.

21 Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

22 Fernando Herrera Calderón and Adela Cedillo, *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964–1982* (London: Routledge, 2012).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were turning to popular culture as a tool for resisting state violence, fomenting protest, and claiming legitimate voice within wider Mexican society. Popular culture was a topic of concern for the PRI regime, which, throughout this time, came to perceive mass-scale popular organization as a threat to its rule, especially among younger people.[23]

CLETA was an ideologically radical organization with Marxist inclinations. One CLETA pamphlet from 1982, for example, described the organization's goal as 'knowing, rescuing, generating, and disseminating, together with our class brothers, popular culture, stamping onto it a character of revolutionary popular culture'.[24] Equally, CLETA's members were pragmatic, advocating coalition-building across ideological differences and the creation of new independent communicative media.[25] In the first instance, CLETA was linked to the student movement; but the organization also connected its goals to labour organizations and the notion of popular communication among the proletarian classes; it sought alliances with Indigenous communities across Mexico; and it was quick to embrace viewpoints from feminism. This triangulation across social groups affected how CLETA understood its own work; for instance, the fact that CLETA's official materials frequently depict art and creativity as a form of labour ought to be seen in the context of attempts to foment ties with labour unions and workers' organizations.

CLETA's rhetoric of 'communication' was concerned with the material and the discursive, simultaneously. To achieve the organization's aims, one pamphlet argues, 'it is important that we labour to create infrastructure' including the printed word, access to performance spaces, and diverse alliances with leftist organizations, including those with ideological differences to CLETA. CLETA also carried out commemorative work related to leftist movements, memorializing the massacres of October 1968 and June 1971, and on Worker's Day 1988 advocating 'the defence of spaces of popular communication'.[26] This material understanding of 'communication' emerged at a time when the PRI regime routinely kidnapped and assassinated dissidents, something that affected especially those CLETA members outside Mexico City;[27] the government also restricted speech by engineering material scarcity – thus manipulating paper prices.[28] Despite these challenges, CLETA spread in the 1970s and 1980s to become a sprawling national-level network with international reach. Within Mexico it held events in live venues, organized large-scale meetings, and distributed newspapers and pamphlets; the organization's members regularly performed in the plaza of the Palace of Fine Arts; but

23 Zolov, *Refried Elvis*.

24 'De chile, de dulce, y de política', pamphlet from 1982, published in Mexico City.

25 See a CLETA pamphlet calling for 'the use and growth of our own mass communication media', entitled 'Centro libre de experimentación teatral y artística', June 1980 (Chilpancingo: Coordinación de Publicaciones, Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero), 3, 8.

26 'Táctica y estrategia política de alianzas. Plan de acción', pamphlet, originating in December 1986 CLETA National Congress, 12.

27 '[W]e weren't fooling around; we really suffered repression, persecution; some *compañeros* were kidnapped, others shot'. 'Intervención de Rocío Reza', in *El CLETA: entre la negación y el reconocimiento*, ed. Enrique Cisneros Luján (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2018), 102.

28 See, for example, Benjamin T. Smith, *The Mexican Press and Civil Society, 1940–1976: Stories from the Newsroom, Stories from the Street* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books, 2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they also used collective mobilization to gain access to formal venues, such as a theatre in the Cuauhtémoc district called the Foro Isabelino, and the Foro Abierto at the Casa del Lago.

CLETA was thus materially and organizationally decentralized, while also strategically deploying collective action to gain access to resources. This infrastructural labour was predicated on a concept of the public sphere, rooted in 'the free play of ideas, generating points of view, polemics . . . from the points at which these views meet'.[29] CLETA's diverse cultural output emphasized theatre and storytelling, specializing in producing formulaic but entertaining plays that dramatized struggles over workers' rights within oppressively run factories, or over patriarchal attitudes within families. The organization also gave prominence to artists working across diverse musical genres including rock, *nueva canción*, and parody songs.[30] The protest singer José de Molina helped to found the organization, and frequently performed at the Foro Abierto;[31] the well-known composer and playwright Enrique Ballesté also helped to found CLETA. This organization was important for the parody song act Los Nakos, and the creators of so-called *guacarrock*, Botellita de Jerez, whose playful, theatrical riffs on received ideas of Mexicanness owes much to the multidisciplinary, irreverent engagement with popular culture developed within CLETA. It was also a vital platform for the protest singer Judith Reyes,[32] and the painter and singer-songwriter León Chávez Teixeiro. Indeed, in 2007 Francisco Barrios 'El Mastuerzo' of Botellita de Jerez claimed that CLETA had given rise to its own category of song: 'At CLETA there emerged – or, there was coined, thanks to a lot of crazy singers – the concept of *canción política* [political song] as a way to say what we want to say through the pamphlet, or the pamphlet as a metaphor.'[33] Perhaps this tendency is best exemplified by the music of Enrique Ballesté, whose music is lucid and welcoming; drawn with melodically clear lines and inviting, straightforward language.

Equally, CLETA's struggle to build infrastructure amid rapid urban growth was reflected in the music of the artists who collaborated with it. I focus here on León Chávez Teixeiro, whose music continuously links the possibility for speech with Mexico City's material infrastructure. Chávez Teixeiro came to CLETA through his engagement with workers' movements which began in the 1960s, often performing at protests and occupations. While relatively unknown in comparison to several of his peers, Chávez Teixeiro has accumulated a cult following based on songs characterized by gritty social realism; his music has been covered by a multitude of

29 'Centro libre de experimentación teatral y artística', 9.

30 'Táctica y estrategia política de alianzas. Plan de acción'.

31 José de Molina was a radical protest singer linked to CLETA. Following the Zapatista uprising, he performed daily in the Zócalo, Mexico City, before being kidnapped and tortured by the government in 1997; he passed away the following year after a struggle with terminal cancer. See Ben Schonveld, 'Letter from l'Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture to Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León', 20 May 1997, www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/41/070.html.

32 Reyes became a symbol of resistance to authoritarian rule in the 1960s after composing a series of *corridos* (ballads) describing unreported acts of government repression against popular protest. In 1969, she was disappeared for several months and tortured, before fleeing Mexico. She performed at many CLETA events in the 1970s and 1980s after returning from exile in Europe, before her death in 1988 from a heart attack. See Hazel Marsh, '"Writing Our History in Songs": Judith Reyes, Popular Music and the Student Movement of 1968', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 29 (2010).

33 'Intervención de Francisco Barrios', in *El CLETA: entre la negación y el reconocimiento*, ed. Cisneros Luján, 191.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

artists including Oscar Chávez, Gabino Palomares, and Amparo Ochoa, and he is the subject of multiple documentary films.[34] His songs continuously pick at the ideological unity of single-party rule by describing state violence against strikers (as in 'Ponciano Flores') and challenging the patriarchal structure of power. Perhaps his most well-known song, 'Mujer, se va la vida, compañera', recounts the arduous daily routine of the mother of a poor family over an unresolved eight-minute repeating harmonic cycle, returning to the unsettling refrain 'Life is disappearing / Going down a hole / Like dirt circling the drain'. His '1910' challenges romanticized histories of the Mexican Revolution by depicting it as a struggle between new and old 'bosses' (*amos*) and describing the revolutionary power struggle in ways reminiscent of PRI-era clientelism:

They beat up the strong, and they bought off the weak
To finance the state, by fire and Constitution . . .
Already so much story, living in lies
Between workers and bosses, History is divided
They have stolen our voice
They have stolen our voice, from you and me.

Most notably for these purposes, the singer's music thematically foregrounds urban decay and disintegration. For instance, the protagonist of his 'Iba volando otra vez' partakes in a mystical flight and looks over the 'dirty city', where they find love; the object of their desires 'drew yourself in the city, like a crack in glass', while 'the world was flying, with bite marks on its feet'. Speaking in 2013, Chávez Teixeiro discussed his artistic obsession with what he described as 'the destruction of the city':

> [In] 1968, I started living with some friends in a neighbourhood and we ended up forming a commune. One of our great impulses was to tour the city, drawing it and singing to it . . . I saw a beautiful city, clean, walkable from end to end . . . I saw how it was filled with cars and chaos, how they destroyed it without any damn mercy, how they destroyed and divided the *barrios*.[35]

In this disintegrating urban setting, Chávez Teixeiro related to me how in Mexico City 'the only spaces for young people, where you could meet and see what was up, were either in your house or in the street . . . or in government spaces, the PRI youth and all that garbage. CLETA was vital because they had a phone number, and they had a venue.'[36] The presence of CLETA was also important in Chávez Teixeiro's search for musical collaborators, since despite disinterest at the organization's constant 'arguments over who swept the floor', it happened that 'there were guitarists there'.[37]

34 *Iba volando* (2010, dir. Berenice Ubeda); *Mujer: se va la vida, compañera* (2019, dir. Mariana Rivera and Josué Vergara).

35 David Barrios, 'León Chávez Teixeiro, música y pasión por y para la ciudad', *Desinformémonos*, 25 August 2013.

36 Interview, León Chávez Teixeiro, 5 May 2013.

37 'Intervención de León Chávez Teixeiro', in *El CLETA: entre la negación y el reconocimiento*, ed. Cisneros Luján, 186.

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Central within CLETA's struggle for space was the Foro Abierto at the Casa del Lago, which the group occupied from March 1973. CLETA's popular appeal was manifested during weekly assemblies at the Foro Abierto, which routinely attracted audiences of thousands and transformed the venue into a site for art, theatre, music, and popular organization. CLETA's access to this venue was tenuous and hard-fought, predicated through much of the 1970s on UNAM's formal autonomy from the national government and agreements with UNAM's workers' union. Efforts to remove CLETA from this venue nonetheless accelerated after 1983 when, at the dawn of Mexico's deep and prolonged neoliberal turn, the government sought to privatize Chapultepec Park. Aiming to charge access and 'turn [the park] into Disneyland', they replaced forest guards with city-level police, and handed swathes of park land to private companies.[38] CLETA's members suspected that university and city authorities intended for the grounds of the Casa del Lago to be expropriated. For example, in 1984 the UNAM authorities constructed a wall to block the entrance, which CLETA pressured them to remove; and the city government built a large garden blocking most of the entrance to the venue, which some of CLETA's members destroyed with sledgehammers. The authorities' attempt to privatize the space only ended with the catastrophic earthquake that left the city in ruins in 1985; 'The Earthquake Saved Us', declared one CLETA publication, recalling events more than a decade later.[39]

CLETA members' accounts also show how authorities' repression implicated belliphonic sounds.[40] In 1985, during a full-time CLETA occupation of the Foro Abierto, the police began a campaign of intimidation against the group, entering the Casa del Lago grounds 'in order to frighten us . . . and honestly they succeeded in that, because hearing police sirens at 2am (in the isolation and silence of Chapultepec) . . . that was scary'.[41] One member of the group wrote that at the Casa del Lago, the university authorities 'bombarded us with loud sounds'[42] each Sunday, when CLETA held cultural events, throughout the 1980s. This 'sonic bombardment' assumed the form of directing large speakers playing music – often protest songs – at full volume towards the Foro Abierto, in order to drown out CLETA's performances and confuse audiences and passers-by.[43] The struggle for access to the Foro Abierto also involved concerts. From the late 1980s to 1993, CLETA aimed to use the space 'at full capacity', holding regular rock concerts on Fridays and theatre events on Wednesdays.[44] Equally, the organization of a rock concert was used in September 1993 as a pretext for *porros* (strike-breakers) sent by a nearby UNAM-linked preparatory school to violently remove

38 Interview, Héctor Murillo, 6 May 2022.

39 *Tía CLETA* #11, 14 January 1996, 6.

40 J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

41 *Tía CLETA* #11, 14 January 1996, 6.

42 'Intervención de Maruca González Mendoza', in *El CLETA: entre la negación y el reconocimiento*, ed. Cisneros Luján, 78–85.

43 This practice stopped at the end of the 1990s when, at one event, members of CLETA and their audience staged an occupation in the Casa del Lago's offices.

44 *Tía CLETA* #11, 14 January 1996, 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

CLETA from the Foro Abierto: they organized a heavy metal concert as a pretext to take over the venue, while carrying machine guns and threatening the organization's leaders. During the night, they 'stole everything there was in the Foro Abierto. The following day they held their rock concert, and at night they handed the venue over to the university authorities.'[45] While the venue was no longer under the control of CLETA, seats were damaged, and a group later arrived to destroy the stage, which CLETA managed to prevent by retaking the venue in December 1993. This attempt against the Foro Abierto, while unsuccessful, presaged its full destruction in 1996.[46]

Rubble

The story is well-known: the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), a revolutionary army led by mestizo Marxist urbanites, and populated mostly by Indigenous people from the state of Chiapas, rose up against the Mexican government on the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement was to come into force, 1 January 1994. After a ceasefire was declared, the EZLN courted international civil society, and established an enduring solidarity network in Mexico and around the world.[47] Yet the Zapatista movement was also violently repressed, especially as the government pivoted towards a model of low-intensity warfare in the late 1990s. Zapatistas and their allies were subject to paramilitary attacks, most notably during the Acteal massacre of 1997, which left a death toll of forty-five women, men, and children,[48] and the 1995 Aguas Blancas massacre in Guerrero.[49] Paramilitary and police violence was documented in the suppression of Zapatista-aligned groups in Oaxaca in 2006, leading to an overall death toll of 27,[50] and in violent repression against a Zapatista-aligned popular protest movement in San Salvador Atenco in the same year.

CLETA's role in supporting the Zapatista movement is less widely told. While the Zapatista uprising was soon framed as a 'social netwar'[51] in which online communication was central, the Zapatista movement's trajectory from localized uprising to transnational social movement was also facilitated from the beginning by the EZLN's ability to communicate through more conventional media. Members of CLETA recounted how, on the morning of 1 January 1994,

45 'Intervención de Maruca González Mendoza', in *El CLETA: entre la negación y el reconocimiento*, ed. Cisneros Luján, 78–85.

46 *Tía CLETA* #11, 14 January 1996, 7.

47 Niels Barmeyer, *Developing Zapatista Autonomy: Conflict and NGO Involvement in Rebel Chiapas* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2009); Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, and Shannan Mattiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

48 Marco Tavanti, *Las Abejas: Pacifist Resistance and Syncretic Identities in a Globalizing Chiapas* (London: Routledge, 2003).

49 Jonathan Fox, Carlos García Jiménez, and Libby Haight, 'Rural Democratisation in Mexico's Deep South: Grassroots Right-to-Know Campaigns in Guerrero', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36/2 (2009).

50 Maurice Magaña, *Cartographies of Youth Resistance: Hip-Hop, Punk, and Urban Autonomy in Mexico* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

51 David Ronfeldt, John Arquilla, Graham Fuller, and Melissa Fuller, *The Zapatista 'Social Netwar' in Mexico* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1998).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Foro Abierto filled with capital-dwellers seeking information about the uprising: 'We only found out about all this on the radio, but the curious thing was that after about an hour, or two hours, the Foro was full. Because people didn't know what was happening and they went to us to ask for information. No? [laughs] We had no idea what was going on either!'[52] CLETA's members told me of frequent trips to Zapatista autonomous communities after the 1994 uprising, and an increasingly close relationship with the EZLN leadership. As the singer and long-standing CLETA contributor Carlos Xeneke later recounted to me, in 1995 the EZLN created five cultural centres called 'Aguascalientes' on autonomous Zapatista territory in Chiapas, and invited CLETA to hold cultural events to inaugurate these cultural spaces:

> If I remember correctly, they said that Aguascalientes were little colourful houses where popular culture was kept, so that it would not die. And curiously we said 'ah well that's the Foro Abierto at the Casa del Lago! A little colourful house where popular culture has always been resisting!'[53]

The CLETA leadership decided to emulate this model, and made a plan to declare the Foro Abierto the 'first centre of Zapatista popular culture in Mexico City'.[54] In early 1996, the group received a letter from EZLN figurehead Subcomandante Marcos endorsing this plan, which they included in a January 1996 edition of their newspaper, *Tía CLETA*;[55] they immediately started to plan an inauguration ceremony to declare the Foro Abierto as an Aguascalientes.

On 13 January 1996, the night before the planned inauguration, riot police from the Secretary of Public Security arrived and removed the few CLETA members present.[56] They then proceeded to physically destroy the venue, grinding it into pieces with bulldozers and pickaxes, leaving it 'just stone upon stone'.[57] Several days after that the CLETA musician and activist Joel Ramírez 'El Chuco' was assassinated by gunmen in the state of Sinaloa. Ramírez was a key organizer for the northeastern chapter of CLETA, and had just returned from a visit to Zapatista autonomous communities in Chiapas. Although those close to Ramírez in Sinaloa advanced several different motives for his assassination, including a local dispute over land ownership with a powerful politician, members of CLETA interpreted the murder as a reprisal against the group following its alliance with the EZLN. After Ramírez was assassinated, CLETA leader Enrique Cisneros told me in 2017:

> we met with our organizations and agreed that the life of a *compañero* ['companion' or 'comrade'] is worth more than the mere restoration of a theatre. The message was clear, they'd gone as far as the assassination of an artist. We took a step back; we held

52 Interview, Marcos Zempoaltecatl, 4 September 2022.

53 Interview, Carlos Xeneke, 1 May 2013.

54 Interview, Enrique Cisneros Luján, 18 August 2017.

55 Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, 'Carta del EZLN al CLETA', *Tía CLETA* #11, 14 January 1996, 2–3.

56 Roberto Ponce, '"El Llanero Solitito" se ampara: la destrucción del foro de la Casa del Lago muestra 'el verdadero rostro fascista de las autoridades', *Proceso* #1005, 5 February 1996, 64.

57 Interview, Enrique Cisneros Luján, 18 August 2017.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> a closing ceremony on the rubble, so we showed up, got past the police who were guarding it, held a closing ceremony, and after the ceremony, went into exile.[58]

This account notably smooths over some of the efforts CLETA made to reclaim the Foro Abierto. For instance, by early February 1996 they had drawn up a twelve-point plan in response to the destruction, which included frequent visits to the site to create awareness of the repression, the organization of cultural events, a campaign to remove UNAM rector José Sarukhán, convoke 'democratic architects' to create proposals for reconstruction of the Foro, and 'gain international support for their implementation'.[59]

Recalling the aftermath of the destruction in an interview, one member of CLETA mocked the way that the contemporary press 'passed it off as just another fact . . . they didn't say "it was destroyed". It was "renovated", "works were done" in the Casa del Lago, in the Foro Abierto, to improve its functioning.'[60] Initially, the university administration explained the destruction of the Foro Abierto as part of a plan for 'remodelling' it; as time went on, however, no such plan materialized.[61] Meanwhile, the story's coverage in the press was patchy, being reported in left-leaning *La Jornada*, *Unomásuno*, and *Proceso* and – perhaps more surprisingly – appearing on several occasions in the government-affiliated *Excélsior*. However, such press coverage often rehearsed official narratives about the venue's destruction, even in sympathetic newspapers. For instance, the story was initially reported in independent, left-leaning newspaper *La Jornada* only in the form of a brief, somewhat tepid note of less than a hundred words, and a letter of condemnation published several days later. The note reads as follows:

> The Free Centre for Artistic and Theatrical Experimentation (CLETA) denounced that their attempt to declare the Foro Abierto at the Casa del Lago as the First Aguascalientes of Mexico City was frustrated by a hundred riot police on Friday evening. According to official data, what took place was the completion of the investigation 50/ACI/37/96-01 by means of removal [*por despojo*]. CLETA, for their part, denounced the destruction of the forum and of their sound equipment.[62]

This note thus foregrounds the government's rationale given for destroying the venue, and smothers the story with banal officiality, minimizing the destruction of the venue by its equation with the far more commonplace destruction of sound equipment. Two days after this note, *La Jornada* published a three-paragraph letter by the National Encounter of University Unions, which condemns

> the savage aggression against this cultural project [which] demonstrates the character of governors to confront dissent and fear of criticism, the Dirty War through privatizations, anti-democracy, repression, crimes, tax increases, refusals to release information, and other actions . . . The National Encounter of University Unions

58 Interview, Enrique Cisneros Luján, 18 August 2017.

59 Ponce, '"El Llanero Solitito"'.

60 Interview, Héctor Murillo, 6 May 2022.

61 Ponce, '"El Llanero Solitito"'.

62 'CLETA: Obstaculiza la policía la creación de Aguascalientes-DF', *La Jornada*, 14 January 1996, 26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> pronounces in favour of the immediate return of said installations, which are the inheritance of UNAM; compensation for damages caused; and absolute respect for this cultural space, which belongs to the people of Mexico.[63]

Despite this strongly worded condemnation, the story was barely followed up at all within the pages of *La Jornada* itself, although through the years it would occasionally be referred to in passing by the newspaper's journalists.[64] At this time, *La Jornada* had the second-highest circulation of any daily publication in Mexico City;[65] other publications with a smaller reach documented the destruction in more detail. *Proceso*, a more specialized left-wing magazine, included features on the story twice in 1996. The newspaper *Unomásuno* was closest to treating the destruction with the seriousness it merited, placing images of the rubble on its front page on the following day. In general, however, the story swiftly dropped out of the news.

The preceding discussion thus makes evident that the destruction of the Foro Abierto at the Casa del Lago was not a single act, but was wrapped up in longer-run material and cultural histories. This act was facilitated, most clearly, by the weakening of the organization by the paramilitary attack of September 1993, after which several key members became inactive;[66] but the destruction of the venue was also made possible by long-run acoustic violence by the university administration and city authorities; and by the silencing of the story within mainstream media sources. In the next two sections, I will explore how CLETA struggled, in the popular imagination, to turn the rubble into repression; and I will then explore divisions that later emerged in the organization, which made it more difficult to conserve the memory of the Foro Abierto.

Rubble and repression: contestations over memory

There are two ways that the ruined forum can be positioned within broader historical analysis, which I explore here in successive sections. In both, I engage Couldry's critical politics of voice, defined as people's ability to 'give an account of themselves and of their place in the world'.[67] Voice, Couldry highlights, is often foundational to 'people's capacities for social cooperation'.[68] By the same token, since 'we do not generate the means by which we narrate [but] emerge as subjects into a narrative form', the capacity for voice is the product of collective action.[69] This section explores the shared meaning-making practices that emerged

63 'Reprueban la destrucción del Aguascalientes de la Casa del Lago', letter published in *La Jornada*, 16 January 1996, 2. The story received more detailed attention in *Proceso*.

64 Indeed, later in 1996 the newspaper gave a page to the director of Chapultepec Park to explain the 'modernization' of this space. María Luisa Mendoza, 'En breve, la reestructuración de Chapultepec. Existen varios proyectos para mejorar la situación del Bosque', *La Jornada*, 24 September 1996, 39.

65 Sallie Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 142.

66 'Intervención de Maruca González Mendoza', in *El CLETA: entre la negación y el reconocimiento*, ed. Cisneros Luján, 82.

67 Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 1.

68 Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 2.

69 Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 8–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

around the rubble, in an expression of the formative aspects of censorship.[70] The discussion here also builds upon the work of anthropologists exploring ways that ruins are contested by competing groups, which clash over heritage-making and claims to citizenship,[71] and upon research exploring acoustic responses to ruined settings, as in Anderton's exploration of the 'uniquely sonic possibilities of wartime rubble' during post-war reconstruction in Berlin.[72] I explore here the ruined site of the Foro Abierto as a focal point for both the production of organization and sociality and the construction of shared voice in resistance of authoritarian government.

CLETA re-established themselves in the Casa del Lago grounds slowly, especially after the 1997 election victory of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in Mexico City, and during the student strikes at UNAM from 1999, for which CLETA joined the organizing committee. In part, CLETA reclaimed the rubble through hosting a series of cultural events there. As well as sneaking onto the ruined Foro Abierto just after its destruction to conclude the ceremony to declare it an Aguascalientes, CLETA returned for thirty minutes to the site of the venue in July 1996,[73] and in October 1997 hosted a theatre event to protest against the Mexico City regent's role in the venue's destruction.[74] Such events often attracted hostility. For example, during a two-day event at the Casa del Lago in 1999 featuring protest song and readings of Zapatista declarations, a man turned up 'with a table knife and a carving knife; aggressive, he rambled incoherently and insulted the audience in a threatening tone . . . they shouted for him to leave and practically threw him out without any intervention from University security'.[75] Despite such aggressions, in 2001 CLETA reached an agreement with the university to access the site.[76] The Foro Abierto was never reconstructed – instead, a semi-permanent stage built around a shipping container was erected, with the venue's changing rooms still submerged beneath rubble.

CLETA's gradual return to the site provoked not only aggressions of this nature, but also continual acts of what Butler calls 'deauthorization' by the university authorities.[77] In response to a CLETA event held opposite the destroyed auditorium on 1 January 1998, the newly installed director of the Casa del Lago issued a conditional welcome which misdirected blame for repression towards the group itself: she invited CLETA to occupy the site on the condition that they 'enter and leave our Bosque clean . . . without invading others' rights'.[78] A similar tendency is also witnessed in official histories, where the destruction goes almost

70 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 132–3.

71 Fontein, 'Graves, Ruins, and Belongings'; Bloch, 'Animate Earth'.

72 Abby Anderton, *Rubble Music: Occupying the Ruins of Postwar Berlin, 1945–1950* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019), 228–9.

73 'Actores del CLETA entraron 30 minutos ayer a Casa del Lago de Chapultepec', *Unomásuno*, 22 July 1996, 12.

74 'Regresará el CLETA a la Casa del Lago', *El Universal*, Cultura, 3 October 1997, 3.

75 Yanireth Israde, 'Los integrantes del CLETA regresaron a la Casa del Lago', *La Jornada*, 2 January 1999, www.jornada.com.mx/1999/01/02/cul-lago.html.

76 Interview, Mercedes Nieto and Violeta Hernández, 21 August 2022.

77 Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 137.

78 Roberto Ponce, 'Adriana Luna Parra, nueva directora de Chapultepec, advierte que se revisarán las concesiones de las empresas que operan en el bosque', *Proceso* #1103, 21 December 1997, 58.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

without mention,[79] and which occasionally appeal to notions of sonic 'ordering' in order to 'deauthorize' CLETA. This the case of a 2001 book on the Casa del Lago which mentions CLETA only once, as a group formed by

> young people who claimed to have artistic aspirations [which] interrupted the harmony [*armonía*] in which all the activities of Casa del Lago were carried out, by taking over the Foro Abierto with the pretext of expressing their concerns [literally 'disquiet', *inquietudes*] there. From that moment on, their protest demonstrations disturbed the sacred peace [*santa paz*] of this cultural venue, where the authorities had to deal with daily scandals [*escándalos* – a term connoting both noise and public disorder], carried out by this peculiar group that appeared Sunday after Sunday in the Foro Abierto, interrupting the activities planned with so much endeavour.[80]

The dismissive tone of this writing marshals a binary opposition between disquiet/disturbance and harmony/peace, which both have roots in the colonial era and, as Natalia Bieletto-Bueno exposes,[81] is linked to patterns of class distinction and social exclusion in contemporary Mexico City. Similar arguments through which CLETA's members are dismissed as intruders on university territory have held until very recently.[82]

Yet evident, in the way that the late 1990s was recalled by key CLETA members during my research, was the use of the destruction of the venue as a pretext to construct shared voice. 'What they couldn't destroy', CLETA organizer and playwright Enrique Cisneros told me defiantly in 2017, 'was the history.'[83] CLETA sought to maintain the shared memory of the Foro Abierto through their monthly publications *El Machete* and *Machetearte*, the latter of which, created in 1998, achieved a wide distribution of 17,000. They also incorporated this history of repression into an itinerant ritual life, through events held to call for reconstruction, and through acts of naming – a CLETA theatre in Acapulco, for instance, was renamed the 'Joel Ramírez "El Chuco" CLETA Theatre'. Ramírez's life and music have also been commemorated more recently, in a twenty-minute documentary made by the German independent filmmaker Rainer Stöckelmann, produced in April 2015 before Stöckelmann's death later

79 One otherwise detailed book on CLETA, sponsored by the government-funded Institute of Bellas Artes, gestures only once in passing to the destruction of the Foro Abierto. See Julio César López, *CLETA: historia de un movimiento cultural artístico independiente* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2012), 193. This book overlooks the life, musical contributions, and assassination of Joel Ramírez 'El Chuco' entirely. In turn, while CLETA has been discussed in some scholarship (e.g., Marsh, 'Writing Our History'), the destruction of the auditorium has been overlooked by scholars.

80 *Casa del Lago, un siglo de historia* (Dirección General de Publicaciones, June 2001), 87. Cited in 'Intervención de Maruca González Mendoza', in *El CLETA: entre la negación y el reconocimiento*, ed. Cisneros Luján, 81.

81 Natalia Bieletto-Bueno, 'Noise, Soundscape and Heritage: Sound Cartographies and Urban Segregation in Twenty-First-Century Mexico City', *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies*, 4/1–2 (2017).

82 The director of the Casa del Lago told me in 2018 that CLETA 'weren't part of the University . . . And at some point there were people who decided that the way to confront the problem was to destroy the venue. I don't necessarily agree with it, but that's how it happened'. Interview, José Wolffer, 22 August 2018.

83 Interview, Enrique Cisneros Luján, 18 August 2017.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that year.[84] This documentary contains interviews with Ramírez's family and friends, alongside recuperated footage of the singer and activist performing, both alone in his bedroom and at social events. It shows Ramírez's playing and composition as evocative of the *canción política* of Enrique Ballesté, in its simply constructed, accessible melodic phrasing and in Ramírez's voice itself, marked by a bright, high-pitched nasal resonance. The documentary also features later footage of Enrique Cisneros talking about his memories of Ramírez to one of the musician's daughters, who was very young when her father died, and Cisneros telling the story of Ramírez's assassination in various public sites, often without amplification.

It is worth dwelling on how this documentary portrays Ramírez's life. As it recounts, Ramírez was a committed activist in more militant organizations prior to joining CLETA, apparently due to the threat of repression. He was also, by the time of his death, a father to two young daughters. Ramírez was also disabled, needing to use a prosthetic leg (the sound of which gave rise to his onomatopoeic nickname 'El Chuco'). The documentary presents Ramírez as a charismatic figure and a committed participant in community action who organized struggles for land in Culiacán, Sinaloa, where he helped to found several new communities (one of which is called the Colonia Joel Ramírez). It also describes how, just prior to his murder, Ramírez had travelled to autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas, and tells us that in one, Morelia, Ramírez's death is still commemorated as part of annual Day of the Dead festivities. Ramírez was also an active musician, who performed both protest songs and songs written for children. The documentary features nine clips in total of performances of original songs, some recorded by Ramírez alone in his room, others recorded at an impromptu performance at a private gathering of activists, and yet others at public performances.

Within the documentary, several different motivations are suggested for Ramírez's assassination. First, two of the colleagues with whom he founded several new *colonias* in Culiacán suggest that the murder was a reprisal against Ramírez on the part of two local landowners – one of whom was a cartel leader, and another who was a powerful politician. Second, one friend of Ramírez suggests that the activist was killed because he had just returned from Chiapas as the person 'charged with extending the [Zapatista] struggle in this region'. Third, Enrique Cisneros connects the assassination to wider repression against CLETA, describing 'the possibility that [Ramírez] was murdered as a way of saying to us at the Casa del Lago, turn it down a notch, see how far we can go', although he concedes that 'we can't prove it'. Finally, Ramírez's widow alludes to broader government impatience with the activist's activities: 'he was already in the way of the government. Like, they said, we are going to get him out of the way . . . because he's already giving us a lot of trouble [*nos está dando mucha guerra*].' Notably, the first two interpretations foreground local conflict; indeed, one friend of Ramírez recounts having begged the activist to leave the area and take refuge with his friends in CLETA

84 Rainer Stöckelmann, dir., 'Homenaje al cantor y gran luchador social JOEL RAMIREZ "EL CHUCO"', posted April 2015, *Vimeo*, https://vimeo.com/125632078?fbclid=IwAR0BiNry3egMJeIejn–mPdg7d9UM41ken9bZOmtsZZi7CiKCNxtqaWnHQk.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in Mexico City. Only the third of these interpretations articulates Ramírez's assassination directly to the rubble at the Casa del Lago.

Yet, importantly, the documentary depicts CLETA's members responding to both events by tying together webs of new affective and social connection. This includes several of Cisneros's activities, such as sharing his memories of Ramírez with the activist musician's daughter: 'He had a lot of charisma. He stood up and everyone turned to see him. He started playing his guitar. Or he was among children and was walking, and there came all the *pipiolera* [children] behind him.' Cisneros is also shown talking about Ramírez, amplified, in front of the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (NAS), and without amplification, on a street corner in Culiacán, before a group of activists holding up images of people who had been disappeared or assassinated. In terms of the shared construction of voice, the latter act is an especially powerful one. As Tausig shows in the case of political protests in Thailand, the acoustic amplification of voice is not equivalent to its political power; intentionally quiet voices can also move.[85] The powerful act of recounting, on a street corner and without amplification, the material conditions of CLETA's marginalization strengthened a set of social ties through which voice was given value,[86] and a figuratively detached 'voice' from 'loudness'.

This scene is indicative of a clear outcome of the venue's destruction, which played out through the second half of the 1990s: the rubble motivated organization around a series of meaning-making exercises through which 'rubble' was constructed as 'repression', thus facilitating resistance in response to authoritarian rule.[87] In a context where official accounts held the destruction to constitute a proportionate response to CLETA's occupation of the venue, rubble served as a pretext for shared activities to construct and solidify shared voice, challenge official histories, and enunciate resistance to authoritarianism. How did these developments relate to the series of events that ended PRI rule in Mexico? Some of those recalling events decades later drew the venue's destruction into a triumphalist narrative, associating the government's realization that it could not erase CLETA's voice through an act of material destruction with a comparative withdrawal of state violence. At the same time, more recent events evoke other kinds of narrative. In the next section, I examine the organization's more recent history, showing how the destruction of the venue has facilitated the disintegration of shared voice.

Disarticulated voices

Where the ruined auditorium could be seen as a site around which agency and collective action accumulated, it may also be understood in the opposite manner. 'Ruin' is not only a noun, but also a 'vibrantly violent verb',[88] an act which removes agency and disarticulates

85 Benjamin Tausig, *Bangkok Is Ringing: Sound, Protest, and Constraint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 86–104.

86 Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 2.

87 This observation can be taken to complement recent scholarship exploring how music may be used to construct ruins from rubble, such as Anderton and Sprigge, 'Musical Resonances of Catastrophe'.

88 Stoler, 'Imperial Debris', 194.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

communities. It follows that, if material edifices such as concert halls and auditoriums extend materialities of voice,[89] ruins can effect vocal *disarticulations*. This point extends into the political connotations of voice, as in Tausig's exploration of megaphonic speech in Thai dissident movements, a technology which produces authority and 'collects up the people by disciplining and uniting them, and by embodying a story of shared meanings'.[90] Just as the technology of the megaphone extends individual voice so as to also interpellate solidarities and collective action, the Foro Abierto had been adapted over several decades into a similarly unilinear, shared political voice. Its destruction, I argue here, prefigured a dissembling of voice in the 2000s and 2010s, as the group became internally divided and scattered across the capital.

As mentioned earlier, I first encountered the Foro Abierto in 2013; later visits to the venue, most notably in 2018, made clear that the social context surrounding it had changed. The Casa del Lago now sponsored frequent free-to-attend rap battles on its grounds, such as the popular series Secretos de Socrates. Here, silencing was not a political act, but one wrapped up in a power play between competitors. Participants in rap battles seek to leave their opponents silenced; a mark of success for a competitor is when the audience begin to whistle for them to stop, out of concern for their opponent.[91] The rhetoric of silencing at such rap battles invokes a kind of subjective ruination: participants boast of leaving opponents 'destroyed' (*destrozado*) and 'shattered' (*despedazado*).

Internal divisions within CLETA, meanwhile, meant that the organization's resources were now starkly divided between two separate groups: OPC-CLETA (the 'OPC' standing for 'Political Cultural Organization') and a group named after the National Autonomous University of Mexico, CLETA-UNAM – the former group now had access to the Foro Abierto. In interviews, members of CLETA gave differing accounts of the split. Some emphasized differences of opinion over the legitimacy of receiving government support as the centre-left Morena (Movement of National Regeneration) grew in power: Enrique Cisneros, who was allied to CLETA-UNAM, advocated working alongside the Morena government, alienating a more radical, anarchist faction within the group which was wary of official co-optation. Other members emphasized disagreements over the relationship between cultural expression and political ideology.[92] Nonetheless, my conversations with members of both OPC-CLETA and CLETA-UNAM indicated comparative agreement across the two splinter groups about these ideological debates. To my mind, the split was thus better attributed to personal disputes relating to the distribution of labour, so-called *protagonismo* ('showing off'), and access to resources. Yet CLETA had always witnessed personal disputes and disagreements. It was possible to understand the social fragmentation of CLETA as a long-term consequence of the destruction of the Foro Abierto; there were fewer incentives

89 See Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 19–29.

90 Tausig, *Bangkok Is Ringing*, 77–85.

91 Interview, Jack Adrenalina, 17 May 2019.

92 Interview, Héctor Murillo, 6 May 2022.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to overcome disagreements and factional disputes for the sake of access to the far smaller, less visible temporary stage now called the Foro Abierto.

The following year, in May 2019, Enrique Cisneros – who had long been CLETA's figurehead – passed away at the age of 70. His passing accentuated divisions between CLETA's two factions, which were made especially evident in two events held on the same day in August that year. As CLETA-UNAM held an event to commemorate Cisneros's life in a theatre owned by the Mexican Syndicate of Electricians, OPC-CLETA held a separate cultural event on the temporary stage erected over the ruins of the old auditorium. I went first to the latter event, which featured hip-hop, West African dance, and a *juglar* ('troubador'). One act, a radical Marxist hip-hop duo called La Otra Rima, had a story to tell about censorship, which was to dovetail unpredictably with one about rubble. With a fiercely combative far-left stance, the pair's performance was rooted in a starkly black-and-white resistance paradigm, in which they supported groups that had been violently repressed by the Mexican state, such as the *normalistas*, the EZLN and its allies across Mexico, and peasant and workers' labour organizations.

While onstage, La Otra Rima connected Mexico's repressive histories with their own experiences of censorship: the pair had recently had a music video pulled from YouTube. I want to reflect on this case here, as it opens up questions about potential complicities between the claim to have been a victim of censorship and acts of violent ruin-making; about how researchers form relationships with artists whose work may be censored; and about how the connections between censorship, voice, and rubble may change. Entitled 'Apunta y dispara' ('Point and Shoot'), this video features the two members of the group performing to the camera on a rooftop, while one waves a Soviet flag. Built around a heavy guitar hook, the song conflates references to violent actions against 'capitalist' civilians in peacetime with wartime anti-fascist combat: 'The red brigade marches / Marking the path / Point, shoot / Don't miss your target.' As this chorus indicates, the song may be described as 'campist', bifurcating geopolitics into capitalist/fascist and anti-capitalist/socialist camps, with the latter group dispensing violence against the former. The song claims itself to be best 'enjoyed with a rifle, pointed at the boss of a bank / Giving those worms what they deserve / Like the children of [Lebanese-Mexican billionaire Carlos] Slim, kidnapped and enslaved.' At the same time, it involves association with peasant and workers' organizations and with armed organizations supporting indigenous populations, such as the EZLN. 'Apunta y dispara' also contains a line which has since ballooned in significance: 'Honour and glory to the Ukrainian militants, combating fascism, fighting for tomorrow.' As the pair has clarified on social media, this line praises Russian separatist fighters in Luhansk and Donetsk, reflecting the baseless and perverse depiction of Ukraine as governed by neo-Nazis.

The video to this song was flagged as 'violent' and 'inappropriate' by YouTube in the summer of 2018. It was then removed by the website, and the pair's account with the platform was frozen. They responded by moving the video to Facebook, with a statement condemning the deletion of the video by YouTube, accompanied by the hashtag *#noalacensura* ('no to censorship'). This statement objected to its definition as 'inappropriate' by comparison with 'thousands of music videos which apologize for drugs, drug trafficking, violence, *machismo* and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

misogyny'. It also presented a variation on leftist contestations of mainstream discourses about violence.[93] 'Violence is not a worker or peasant taking an AK-47 to demand that their rights are respected', the pair wrote, 'violence is unemployment, exploitation [and] hunger'. Their invocation of power relations as central to definitions of violence and censorship was, evidently, not one shared by YouTube (or its algorithm).

While I was uneasy at the song's stark and violent lyrics, as I first encountered it I did not connect it to real-life acts of violence, especially given that it was performed by a pair of unknown university students. Yet the power relations the pair alluded to in condemning the song's censorship were mutable. Butler's view of speech acts as 'at once bodily and linguistic' both complicates liberal discourse on censorship and emphasizes how constructions of the 'speech act' may be made and unmade over time.[94] The conceptual separation I had made between speech and action became untenable after February 2022, as the anti-Ukraine disinformation perpetuated in 'Apunta y dispara' was used to legitimize the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This story also has a personal aspect: in March 2022 I accepted a research post in Warsaw, a city almost entirely destroyed by the Nazis and constructed anew atop the rubble left behind, and a refuge for millions of Ukrainians fleeing war and watching on in horror as the Russian army bombarded cities populated by friends and family members.

It seems unlikely that YouTube's earlier decision to suppress the video was related to conflict in Ukraine; and the band has chosen not to play 'Apunta y dispara' on those occasions after the 2022 invasion that I have seen them perform. Yet this case opens questions about the ways that, as scholars, we carry experiences of censorship across different histories and cultural contexts, with their tensions and incommensurabilities; about what happens when we do ethnography with artists whose speech simultaneously renders them both vulnerable to censorship and an unsympathetic victim of it; and about how fieldwork allegiances are reshaped during conflicts that reveal causal continuities between political speech and material ruin. Rubble may aid us, figuratively, to negotiate adequate responses to the intellectual theatre of war, given the connection between the disinformation encountered in 'Apunta y dispara' and the neat, Euclidean organization of this band's campist anti-capitalism. It also suggests a constructive response to the ethnographic challenge inherent to this situation: to simultaneously maintain sympathy for a little-known act highlighting repression against Indigenous and workers' organizations in Mexico, while also maintaining support for the victims of Russian military aggression in Ukraine, and drawing attention to the shattering of cities and bodies that disinformation about this aggression facilitated.

In turn, the pair's performance at the Casa del Lago was just as notable for the stories of censorship and rubble that it omitted. Given La Otra Rima's emphasis on censorship in their performance at the Foro Abierto, I found it surprising that when I spoke to the pair afterwards, they were unaware of the 1996 destruction of this venue; and even more surprising that this act of ruination went unmentioned at the event overall. In this sense, OPC-CLETA's event contrasted with the CLETA-UNAM event held on the same day to celebrate Cisneros's life,

93 E.g., bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: H. Holt and Co, 1995).

94 Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 141, 15, 33.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which featured notable performers such as *canto nuevo* singer Gabino Palomares, parody song act Los Nakos, and rock musician Francisco Barrios 'El Mastuerzo' of Botellita de Jerez who, performing with his Cuban *son* band Calle 4, dedicated the event to 'all of the history of CLETA', gesturing to the group's recently lost unity. The event also featured dance, theatre, and comedy – including, touchingly, a comedy sketch performed by two of Cisneros's young children. Where OPC-CLETA made no mention of the destruction of 1996, CLETA-UNAM's event made space for two activists petitioning the government – as in 2013 – for reconstruction of the original Foro Abierto.

OPC-CLETA's decision to hold an event coinciding with CLETA-UNAM's commemoration of Cisneros's life was viewed with bitterness by some members of the latter group. Yet OPC-CLETA's failure to give narrative prominence to the destruction of the Foro Abierto did not result, as some CLETA-UNAM members suggested, from ignorance of or indifference to the group's history: this was a topic of constant comment in OPC-CLETA's meetings. Rather, in a perverse twist, given that OPC-CLETA was now engaged in a continuous struggle with UNAM administrators for access to the new Foro Abierto, its members claimed that it would risk their hard-won and precarious access to this site to recount the history of the destruction of the venue – and the criticism of the university it implied – during public events.[95] The internal split within CLETA weakened its members' ability to claim space, long predicated on its ability to draw sufficient numbers for longer-term occupations. The overall consequence was a perverse contrast between the comparative freedom to discuss the destruction in other sites, and the silence experienced at the Foro Abierto itself over the venue's own material history. Internal division also diminished CLETA's capacity to communicate its own histories in other spheres; for instance, CLETA members had long distributed the newspaper *Machetearte* on public transport in exchange for donations, periodically mobilizing *en masse* to convince the authorities not to arrest the publication's distributors as illegal vendors. CLETA's internal split thus left these distributors more vulnerable to arrest, as fewer members were available to protect them.[96] Problems with this newspaper's distribution and the silences at the Foro Abierto itself, both spoke to ways that the rubble had performed its work, erasing the nuanced, intimate, emotional experiences of this space.

Silencing censorship: sounding response-ability

As this article has shown, the history of CLETA is important for understanding how, in the late twentieth century, Mexican protest culture became increasingly fragmented, diverse, and distanced from notions of post-revolutionary cultural 'unity'. Equally, it has suggested responses to the questions: What accounts for the forgetfulness about the destruction of this auditorium? Why did this most self-evident, starkly violent, and material story of repression fail to enter the official litany of PRI authoritarianism? In interviews, CLETA members have tended to account for this forgetfulness in terms of power.[97] The organization's own

95 Interview, Mercedes Nieto and Violeta Hernández, 21 August 2022.

96 Interview, Maruca González Mendoza, 18 June 2022.

97 Interview, Mercedes Nieto and Violeta Hernández, 21 August 2022.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

resources to tell these stories were mostly limited to small-scale cultural events, and newspapers distributed at them. This story serves, then, as a reminder of the radical dependence that narratives of censorship have on actors' present-day ability and willingness to perform them. It reveals both the dangers of voicelessness and the multiple ways that CLETA's marginality was manifested, as the group's radical politics renders them an unsympathetic victim. The destruction of the Foro Abierto combined with the assassination of Joel Ramírez, wider repression against the EZLN, government influence over the print media, and ongoing government sponsorship of official history to produce the rubble as silent. This was a necessarily overdetermined act of repression which exposed, as I have argued throughout, the mutual imbrication of speech with matter.

Another side to this story has to do with how the nuances of stories of censorship resist simplistic historical narratives. Some aspects of the destruction of the Foro Abierto fit within a semi-official account of Mexican democratization, in which Dirty War-era state repression ended as the PRI lost legitimacy in the 1980s and 1990s; the state lost control over the administration of violence; and state repression receded as civil society and protest movements gained strength. The destruction of the venue, in this account, revealed only government weakness, and the irrepressible nature of CLETA's socially constructed voice in resistance. At the same time, I suggest, this account reveals how the simultaneously material, sonorous, and social construction of voice unfolds according to its own times. The effects of authoritarian destruction were not immediately apparent, but were revealed through far more recent social divisions. Indeed, although the destruction of the venue is causally associated with the 1994 Zapatista uprising, it also occurred after a very specific and local (and, it ought to be added, belliphonic) struggle over space which unfolded over decades. Further, an authoritarian style of governance has also been witnessed in CLETA's interactions with the state under multiparty democracy. Here, it is vital to take fragmentation seriously as a material reality and as a principle for narrative organization, which can be more hospitable to activist histories and experiences before, during, and after democratic 'transition'. Taking fragmentation seriously entails embracing the multiple accounts of censorship and repression available to us from flourishing recent literature on late twentieth- and twenty-first-century Mexico, ranging from concepts of *dictablanda* ('soft dictatorship'),[98] to work drawing continuities between repression in Mexico and the Southern Cone dictatorships,[99] to perspectives on state and paramilitary violence before and after the transition to democracy,[100] and on the violence of the neoliberal security state in Mexico.[101]

98 Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

99 Jaime Pensado and Enrique C. Ochoa, *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression During the Global Sixties and Subversive Seventies* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2018).

100 John Gledhill, 'Indigenous Autonomy, Delinquent States, and the Limits of Resistance', in *De-Pathologizing Resistance: Anthropological Interventions*, ed. Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (London: Routledge, 2017); Alessandro Zagato, 'State and Warfare in Mexico: The Case of Ayotzinapa', *Social Analysis* 62/1 (2018).

101 Markus-Michael Müller, *The Punitive City: Privatized Policing and Protection in Neoliberal Mexico* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fragmentation is, in this sense, a vital resource for response-able assembling of history: it affords sufficient light-footedness in the application of historical narrative to allow the specificities of discrete experiences to be made perceptible. On the other hand, the comparative historical neglect of this spectacular, brutal instance of censorship, in which a group had a key aspect of its ability to produce voice materially taken apart, may be attributed to a failure to take fragmentation seriously. In this sense, perhaps, rubble may also be taken as a figurative starting-point for productive responses to censorship. In recent years, scholars have begun to engage in a shared disarticulation of musicological research, by – for example – calling for the 'music' concept to be decentred or removed from the discipline's self-definition.[102] It is evident from the history of CLETA that the disciplining of (musical) knowledge may undermine researchers' ability to recognize acts of censorship as we find them, especially in authoritarian contexts. The relevance of CLETA through decades of authoritarian rule – its ability to evade an official culture of monolithic, category-driven stasis – has to do with the eclectic, fluid nature of the organization's output; yet this is the same condition which underpins CLETA's neglect in the scholarly literature.

The de-disciplining or disarticulation of scholarly labour may render us better-placed both to identify acts of cultural censorship wherever they are encountered and to attend to these acts through weaving together new connections. Part of my developing response-ability to the Foro Abierto has involved an ongoing attempt to locate, digitize, and make available the music of Joel Ramírez, tragically murdered in the midst of state repression. Divisions within CLETA have complicated these efforts, as different sources of documentation about the musician, and about the organization, lie in locations across Mexico: with the musician's family in Sinaloa; in an estate in Oaxaca in which the filmmaker Rainer Stöckelmann resided; in an archive hosted in a community space in Ecatepec; in the University Museum of Contemporary Art (MUAC) to which one member donated an extensive personal collection, which is at present inaccessible to the public; and in CLETA members' personal collections. Few have any idea about the extent to which Ramírez's music was recorded, and this work remains very incomplete. Yet as well as the value intrinsic to amplifying little-heard musical and dissident voices, this activity constitutes a valuable opportunity to mediate across fragmented personal relationships. 'Recuperating' Ramírez's music constitutes response-ability to rubble in the sense of building, nourishing, and feeling through new articulations across material and social fragmentation.

The more-than-granular materiality of rubble, used here as both a synecdoche for and a material facilitator of state censorship against performance cultures, paradoxically reveals censorship as more than a 'concrete' reality; rather, it is perspectival, simultaneously privative and formative;[103] dependent on certain groups' resources; and diachronic – an occurrence

102 Deborah Wong, 'Sound, Silence, Music: Power', *Ethnomusicology* 58/2 (2014); Natalia Bieletto-Bueno, 'Lo inaudible en el estudio histórico de la música popular. Texto de reflexión crítica', *Resonancias* 20/38 (2016); Katherine Meizel and J. Martin Daughtry, 'Decentering Music - Sound Studies and Voice Studies in Ethnomusicology', in *Theory for Ethnomusicology: Histories, Conversations, Insights*, ed. Harris Berger and Ruth Stone, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2019).

103 Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 132.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572224000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whose meanings and affordances take shape over time. The practical challenge this poses to practitioners of ethnography is rivalled by theoretical challenges within the humanities, where the influence of post-structuralism and the so-called 'new censorship' in the late twentieth century has framed knowledge hierarchies instead around the power relations in which acts of censorship and silencing take place.[104] Given the preoccupation of my research participants with accounts of censorship, however, this seems premature. Encountering (music) censorship suggests a number of response-abilities, the first of which is a commitment to staying with the rubble – sitting with the sounds, silences, and possibilities of disintegration.

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104 See Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression'.

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