

# Narrativizing Cities, Localizing Urban Memories: The (Re) Construction of Place Through Urban *Cueca* in Santiago de Chile (1990-2010)

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## Abstract

This article describes the importance of the Chilean urban *cueca* as a source of Santiago de Chile's urban memory. The main argument explains how *cueca* lyrics transmit a sense of place that brings back a memory of friendship and fraternity, and also how these friendship songs are narratives of urban landscapes strongly connected with old memories and "performed maps," that is, musical performance pathways of the past 50 years in the city. Interviews and nonparticipant observations are taken from two periods of fieldwork in Santiago de Chile between 2008 and 2009. Theoretically based on the concept of *music scene*, Edward Soja's idea of *vivid space* and José Bengoa's analysis of the *lost community*, the article concludes that memories form a counterdiscourse that criticizes the notion of progress or the *Chilean way* to global capitalism, turning upside down the created imaginary of a modern and developed city.

## Keywords

Santiago de Chile, vivid space, memory, lyrics, Chilean urban *cueca*

In 1999, the local musician, Mario Rojas launched the first documentary about the most important urban *cueca* group called Los Chileneros, *La cueca brava de Nano Núñez* (Figure 1). Although media journalists were expecting a performed history-based or a well-documented live concert, when the film came out, they realized that almost half of the story was set in empty streets, old quarters, shattered houses, mysterious passageways, popular food markets, and cheerless images. The documentary was also narrated during endless walking routes by the fine elderly voice of Hernán Núñez (1914-2005), called *Nano*, one of the most brilliant voices of Chilean popular poetry and urban *cueca* during the 20th century. After that, the documentary became not only a biographical account of Núñez's *cueca*-based life but also the beginning of a persistent visual aesthetic that became in turn the identifiably color, smell, sound, and voice of the new urban *cueca* scene in Santiago de Chile, immediately following the dictatorship regime led by Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).<sup>1</sup>

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**Figure 1.** Mario Rojas, *La cueca brava. Bitácora de Los Chileneros*, 1999, Photo.  
Source: Image courtesy of Mario Rojas.

In this short article, I would like to describe the importance of Chilean Urban Cueca (hereafter CUC) as an important source of Santiago de Chile's urban memory. I understand *urban cueca* as a city-based genre, oral-focused, and performed in a shouting vocal style, developed in Santiago de Chile between 1990 and 2010 (aka *cueca chilenera* or *cueca brava*). This genre is different from the peasant-style *cueca*, performed by female duets or trios during the first part of the 20th century that later became mass mediated. I also allocate this phenomenon as a *scene* in the terms stated by Sarah Cohen (1999), who stresses how created social interactions, exchanges of goods and information, and also performed spaces define the production and imaginary of music.<sup>2</sup>

My main point lies on how urban cueca lyrics transmit a powerful sense of place that brings back a memory of friendship and fraternity. The friendship songs are narratives of urban landscapes strongly connected with old memories and "performed maps" of the city over the past 60 years. With "performed maps," I mean itineraries or musical performance pathways of the city contained into urban cueca lyrics. Likewise, based on Edward Soja's (2008) idea of *vivid space*, I show how lyrics create fictional and real marks which help recreate the past but also create meanings about it. Finally, I comment how these memories are a counterdiscourse that criticizes the notion of progress or what could be named the Chilean way to global capitalism, turning upside down the created imaginary of a modern and developed city, something that the Chilean anthropologist, José Bengoa (2006) has called the shift from the *lost community* to the *claimed community*.

Almost all the work I present is based on two periods of fieldwork conducted in Santiago de Chile between 2008 and 2009, during which I collected more than 40 participant observations, 30 interviews, 1 survey, and dozens of press articles from the 1930s to date.

## The Chilean Urban Cueca

The cueca is a social practice and a musical, poetic, and choreographic form found in the southern Andean areas of South America. Although it is danced in Argentina, Peru, and Bolivia, it is

most prominent in Chile. Widespread throughout this country, it is considered a crucial element of local culture and identity and has had the status of “national dance” since the 19th century (Spencer, 2007). Due to the emergence of mass culture in the 20th century, it has occupied an important place in the cultural image of the city and has contributed to create a musical idea of the *chilenidad* or *chileanness*.

Around the 1930s, the dance was split into two types: an urban-style *cueca*, later known as *cueca brava* and characterized for being performed in a shouting vocal style made in round circles (known as *canto a la rueda* or round singing), and a peasant-style *cueca*, performed by female duets (or trios) rooted on traditional repertory sung by female folk musicians (*cantoras de rodeo* or *cantoras campesinas*).<sup>3</sup> While the peasant-like *cueca* became mass mediated, hybridized, and mass produced from the 1930s to the 1960s, the urban *cueca* was an invisible musical practice developed in several popular venues and places of the capital and the port of Valparaíso, in the northwest part of Chile’s central valley. However, the importance of these two types changed after the end of the authoritarian regime led by Pinochet after 1990. After that, a gradual process of revitalization of traditional and urban culture started, prompting a spectacular revival of the *urban cueca* and leaving behind the media visibility of the peasant-style *cueca*. The model to be followed was the music recorded by Los Chileneros, the same group portrayed in Rojas’s documentary.

But the new scene that started in the middle of the 1990s can also be attributed to economic, sociological, and musical factors. According to Carlos Mattos (2002), the deregulation of Chilean economy (around 1975) unleashed a modernization process leading to global capitalism, which caused a steady increase in the gross domestic product until 1998. Although improving macroeconomics did not necessarily imply an improvement of individual family’s welfare, it gave stability to the economy and allowed several urban social policies. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the economy urbanized the city’s morphology transforming Santiago into a global capital alike other cities in the world with more than 6 million denizens (Mattos, 2002, pp. 33-36). Consequently, political changes and new cultural policies transformed the city into a dynamic place to live, raising its qualitative and quantitative indices, despite its enormous social differentials.

Notions of public space, folk, and popular music also experienced significant changes. The authoritarian regime emphasized cultural policies based on nationalistic orientations, fostering peasant-like folk music (especially peasant-like *cueca*) as a cultural practice related with aristocratic-agrarian hegemonic groups from Chile’s central valley.<sup>4</sup> During the 1990s, folk music repertoires—especially *cueca*—slowly started to change their focus abandoning the conservative cultural policies that lingered from the dictatorship to gradually embrace a style close to popular music. With popular music, I mean mediation and technology but not necessarily industrially produced music, that is to say, the use of new instruments (as electric guitar and bass, drums or double bass, the fusion with different genres, the use of technology, or the creation of new types of lyrics). Then new literary forms were explored as new instruments were integrated and fused with other musical forms, thus revitalizing urban culture and refreshing the idea of “popular culture” in a postdictatorial context.

The idea of popular culture was basically understood as a social practice deeply grounded on oral traditions. Such local practices of music connected past and present through representations of marginal popular subjects (especially, the social archetype known as *el roto*) instead of agrarian subjects (*el huaso*). Subsequently, the *cueca* became popular music, and was understood as a “civilian *cueca*” made by a middle-class young generation liberated from the constraints of the dictatorship (cf. Torres, 2010, p. 119). Paraphrasing Richard Middleton (2003), the idea of “popular” in music was understood as a cultural voice inhabiting an imagined urban social space whose configuration was affected historically (p. 253). From then on, old emblematic artists will be revived such as Roberto Parra (1921-1995), Hernán Núñez, Luís Araneda, or *Los Chileneros* as well.

Similarly, new bands became visible. Musicians from *Los Trukeros*, *Los Santiaguinos*, *Los Tricolores*, and *Las Capitalinas* renewed not only poetry but also performance practices as well as lyric structures used in cueca during the past decades. Searching for new combinations and textures to redefine the style led to changes in the use of inherited instruments from the beginning of the century, renewing the genre from its musical foundations.<sup>5</sup> As Torres (2003) says, the urban cueca scene became a social practice that recalled, and still now recalls, memories of space through performance practices.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the “new” popular culture spread with cueca contested the conservative inheritance of the dictatorship and sociological changes occurred in the city by using new spaces for culture, recovering (and giving continuity to) a marginal musical genre and renewing the musical patterns of the “national” music.

## Narrating Urban Memories: Mapping Old Popular Music Venues Through Lyrics

Even though recovering of the popular culture adjusted many elements inside CUC, changes in the lyric contents of the genre deserve special attention. As Bruce Horner (1999) points out, written texts in popular music cannot be conceived as static ideas but as spaces where representations and constructions about experience can be studied or even negotiated, especially through performance as a tool to convey meanings to particular audiences. As Connell and Gibson (2003) summarize “nothing should more closely signify the relationship between music, place and identity than the word of songs” (p. 71). Similarly, one of the most interesting changes of CUC’s revival was an important overhaul of lyrics’ topics, which renewed its emphasis on local places during the 1990s.

The cueca lyrics have generally been grouped into several issues related with historic, affective, and patriotic aspects of the local life of the country. Almost all of these issues have been usually reduced to four categories: (a) the cueca itself (i.e., performance and meaning), (b) the native land (mother country), (c) love or life, and (d) traditions. However, this taxonomy emphasized the idea of love and native land connecting the cueca with abstract folk values. As Torres (2010) explains, the emergence of the new cueca scene developed these issues in a different way giving more importance to the idea of “tradition” than love or native land. Indeed, in 1994, Claro Valdés, Peña and Quevedo (1994) published a history of urban cueca, where he emphasized the idea of tradition in connection with the city specifically. Following him, in 1997, Hernán Núñez divided the genre in seven thematic groups: the cueca environment; the cueca and the folk music; loving and disillusionment; professions and roads; homage; history; and symbols, habits, and *places*. Both Claro and Núñez provided the CUC music scene a new category that highlighted the local narrative, including the tradition and urban sociability as important issues.

With the turn of the century, the new musical scene became a particular poetic genre able to describe and also create day-to-day corners in the city. It was a poetic transforming of images and sounds into stories of urban sociability, paying fair homage to ancient places transmitted by oral tradition. As Andy Bennett (2005) points out, searching social and cultural meanings in popular music texts “inevitably involve[s] an examination of the urban and rural spaces in which music is experienced on a day-to-day basis” (pp. 2-3). Therefore, texts relate and describe such everyday life providing a *narrativization* of place defined by the way in which people construct “their relationships to local, everyday surroundings” (Bennett, 2005). The following urban cueca, called *Santiago mi Capital* (My Capital Santiago; Table 1) makes it very clear.<sup>7</sup>

Almost all the specific places mentioned in this cueca were real but they do not exist anymore. However, they are still part of the history of the city in a special way: being a touristic restaurant in downtown Santiago, *El Pollo Dorado* (The Golden Chicken, founded in 1949; Figure 2) was also one of the most important Bohemian places in the capital during 1950s and 1960s, thus even earning the unofficial name *El fogón de la Chilenidad*, “*The fireplace of*

**Table 1.** *Cueca Santiago mi Capital* (Spanish and English).

Eres capital de Chile	<i>You are Chile's Capital</i>
Tus calles tienen historia	<i>Your streets have history</i>
Las fondas y las picadas	<i>The Fondas<sup>a</sup> and the Picadas<sup>b</sup></i>
Hoy vuelven a mi memoria	<i>Now turn back to my memory</i>
En el Pollo Dorado	<i>In El Pollo Dorado</i>
Y La Carlina	<i>And La Carlina</i>
Se cantaban las cuecas	<i>The cuecas were sang</i>
Capitalinas	<i>From the Capital</i>
Capitalina, ay sí	<i>From capital, oh yes!</i>
El matadero	<i>The slaughterhouse</i>
Fue cuna de cantores	<i>It was cueca singers' cot</i>
Y de cuequeros	<i>And from cuequeros<sup>c</sup></i>
Y con todo cariño	<i>With all my affection</i>
Soy santiaguino	<i>I'm from Santiago</i>

*Translation.* Christian Spencer Espinosa.

<sup>a</sup>The *Fonda* is the 20th century version of the *Chingana*, a kind of handmade tavern built up with bushes and wood that took place along the whole country during the 19th century. Like in the 19th century, today the *Fonda* is considered eminently a popular sociability place, one of the most important venues to express Chilean identity. <sup>b</sup>The *Picada* is a cheap and popular place to eat commonly located in downtown. <sup>c</sup>*Cuequeros* are all of them who are devoted to cueca through singing, dancing, playing, composing, or even as music fan audience.

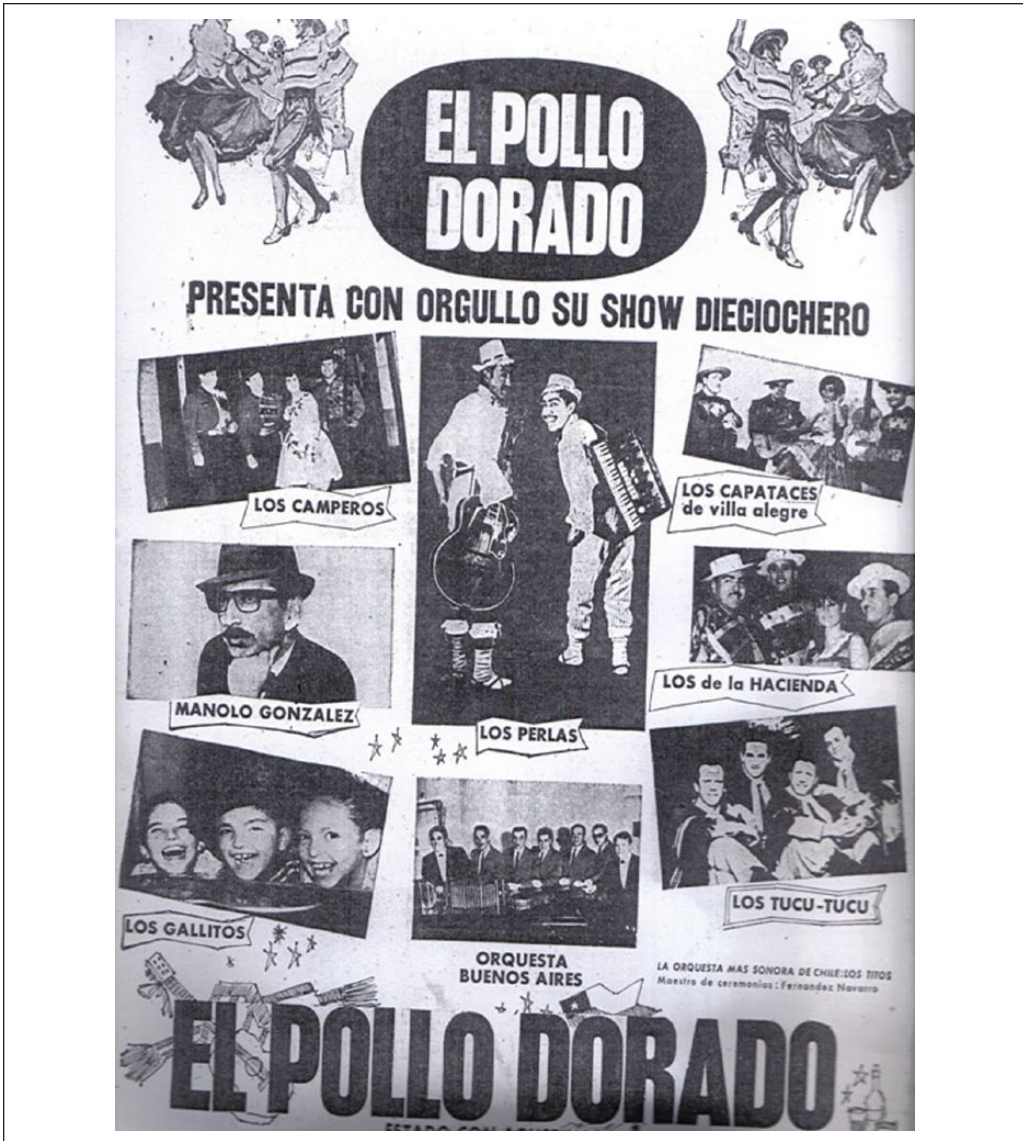
*Chileanness*” (Plath, 1997, p. 139). In fact, several cueca soloist and groups performed in their salons. Some of them include Los Cuatro Hermanos Silva, Silvia Infantas y Los Baqueanos, Carmen Ruiz, Dúo Rey Silva, and Los Perlas, the latter one, the most important reference before *Los Chileneros*.

Even though almost all of these groups were more associated to the peasant-like style than to the urban cueca style, *Santiago mi Capital* includes a reference to *La Carlina*, a well-known brothel of the second part of 20th century. As many old CUC performers express in their memories, interviews, and cueca lyrics (see Núñez, 2005), *La Carlina* symbolizes the way through which CUC survived and remained protected from the increasing modernization of the city. *La Carlina* as a public space thus materialized the memory of the social conviviality of the popular places (cf. Torres, 2001). Since in the local conception the idea of *remolienda*—or brothel—entails notions of a collective and continuous celebration of life, *La Carlina* thus served as an icon of the hence of collective joy.

*El Pollo Dorado* and *La Carlina* lyrics represent both the urban and rural cueca-based music. But they also embody the strong link between brave, old, alternative, and hidden venues of music and social features of CUC during the 20th century. Albeit its reference to specific sites, the phrase *your streets have history* creates a sense of ubiquity that connects present with past from a retrospective point of view. The band Los Santiaguinos changes the descriptive level to an analytical one in order to raise awareness on the historic content of the text, clearly talking about the past but from the present point of view.

A similar case is exemplified by *Santiago, mi Gran Santiago* (Table 2), recorded by the female group *Las Capitalinas*.<sup>8</sup>

As in *Santiago mi Capital*, the cueca *Santiago, mi Gran Santiago* tries to go back, to recapitulate from a hypothetical urban origin of the tradition through the phrase *The birthplace of urban cueca*. In these lyrics, old venues are important references to set up CUC's territories but so are the current places too. For instance, present day restaurants, Las Tejas (Figure 3) and La Piojera still continue to host dance and music gatherings and even visual art shows related with CUC.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 2.** Advertising for *El Pollo Dorado*, presenting one of the most important cueca groups from the 1950s, *Los Perlas*. *Las Últimas Noticias* (September 15, 1967, p. 30).

The lyrics jump in time not only blending different ages of cueca but also connecting locations thus providing spatial urban *continuity* through music; thereby boundaries between present and past are blurred or joined throughout musical performance.

If we connect all these venues, a blended map emerges from the text.

As many urban cuecas, music mappings from lyrics recall successively the urban past, bringing back the old “friendly” city to create or imagine musical pathways. These musical pathways are achieved creating continuous lines or flows between past and present through places and sounds, so creating a sense of musical landscape. In this way, the poetics of place present both a real and an imaginary place simultaneously. The convergence of such material and ideal dimensions connects local urban memories with an integrative idea of the city, thus creating the whole

**Table 2.** Cueca Santiago, mi Gran Santiago (Spanish and English).

Santiago, mi gran Santiago	<i>Santiago, my big Santiago</i>
Cuna de la cueca urbana	<i>The birthplace of urban cueca</i>
Donde cantan la Chilena	<i>Where old cueca is sung</i>
Con panderos y guitarras	<i>With tambourines and guitars</i>
Nos vamos pa Las Tejas	<i>Let's go to Las Tejas</i>
Pa la Piojera	<i>To La Piojera</i>
Donde El Pancho Causeo	<i>To El Pancho Causeo</i>
Y al Quitapenas	<i>To Quitapenas</i>
Y al Quitapenas, si	<i>To Quitapenas, yes</i>
Qué buenas cuecas	<i>Such good cuecas</i>
Donde el Perico Fuentes	<i>To Perico Fuentes</i>
Y La Viseca	<i>And La Viseca</i>
Buena para farrear	<i>The best in the binge</i>
Mi capital	<i>My capital</i>

Translation. Christian Spencer Espinosa.

**Figure 3.** Audience dancing cueca in *Las Tejas* Restaurant in Santiago de Chile—May 16, 2009.

Source: Author.

idea of “musical pathways.” As Ruth Finnegan (2007) explained, music pathways are “socially recognised” (p. 299), and provide occasions for “music making” and “rituals for the urban living” (p. xii). Real or imaginary, musical pathways help building urban landscapes inspired by music practices. So the social memory contained inside lyrics is updated rendering existence to all imaginary spaces registered by the lyric history of the genre. As Simone Pereira (2005) describes for the case of Rio de Janeiro, cities have territorialized symbols that represent polyphonic discourses and *mark points*. These mark points work as synthetic spaces linking memories where we can see “physical elements of shared meanings, intimate topographies connected with people” (pp. 155-156).

My next example comes from an old urban cueca recorded by *Los Chileneros*. In his album, *La cueca brava* from 1968, they include *Me gustan los barrios bravos* (I like brave neighborhoods; Table 3),<sup>10</sup> where 50-year-old streets come to the present to inhabit again the real/imaginary city.

On the one hand, these lyrics expose part of the imaginary around CUC’s history developed in several popular places during the past century, for instance, the Slaughterhouse, the Rail Station, and La Vega. On the other, this cueca is also a city map where popular zones such as brothels, *bôites* (nightclubs), parks, street markets, and marginal neighborhoods are considered part of the urban cueca history and environment. Once more, if we connect all these corners randomly, an urban “popular” pathway surprisingly turns up in front of our eyes; a sort of downtown musical map where you can see the spaces of the city “mapped” by lyrics.

**Table 3.** Cueca Me gustan los barrios bravos (Spanish and English).

Me gustan los Barrios Bravos	<i>I like the brave neighborhoods</i>
Los guapos de corazón	<i>The real popular man</i>
La gallá del matadero	<i>People from the slaughterhouse</i>
Los Chiquillo e' le Estación	<i>The guys from the Rail Station</i>
Y la pasta de la Vega	<i>The friends from La Vega<sup>a</sup></i>
Y Recoleta	<i>And Recoleta</i>
Diez de Julio y San Pablo	<i>Diez de Julio and San Pablo</i>
Y Vivaceta	<i>And Vivaceta</i>
Y Vivaceta, si	<i>And Vivaceta, oh yes</i>
Muy respetada	<i>Always respected</i>
Plaza Almagro y San Diego	<i>Almagro square and San Diego</i>
Blanco Encalada	<i>Blanco Encalada</i>
Lindas canchas de amores	<i>Wonderful corners for love</i>
Los Callejones	<i>The blind alleys</i>

*Translation.* Christian Spencer Espinosa.

<sup>a</sup>The main fruit and vegetable popular market of the city, located near from the old downtown.

While this map does not set a particular route, it summarizes CUC's beliefs namely, the connection between past and present; the imagining and describing of the city, a powerful memory of friendship and fraternity created by the lyrics, the representation of the tough life associated with popular subjects such traders, prostitutes, or musicians. Geographically, this map shows clear links with *Santiago, mi Gran Santiago* (Figure 4), which makes evident the connection between two urban cuecas in two different moments of the 20th century.<sup>11</sup>

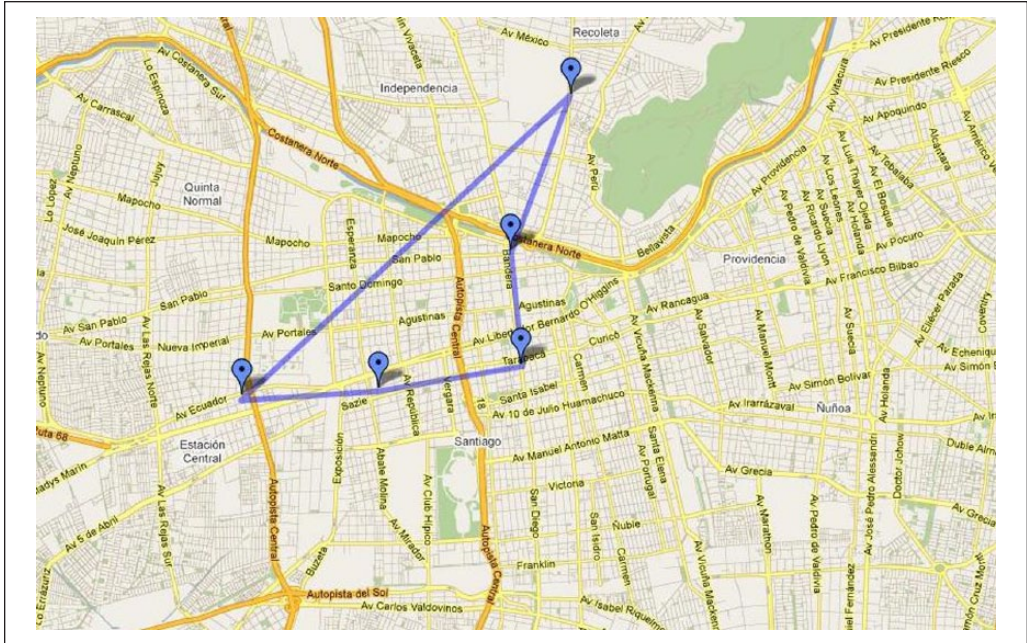
During the 1990s and the 2000s, almost all of urban cueca groups had drawn on this model in different moments of their careers, setting down the boundaries where urban cueca was developed in the past and consequently in the present. Both lyrics and history will become the narration of vivid moments mixing time and place through a city-based performance. As Edward Soja explains, there is a relationship between spatiality and sociability in the geo-history of the urban places. It is a *sociospatial dialectic*, which is the result of the inseparable social, historical, and spatial/geographical dimensions of human life (Soja, 2008). Soja points out that the city of the past 30 years could be thought as a *third space* or third kind of city where social, historical, and spatial/geographical dimensions have taken a particular form as an *entirely vivid space*. This space has become "a simultaneously real and imaginary place, present and virtual, a structured agency and individual and collective experience" (Soja, 2008, p. 40). Then, social relationships become undefined until their "spatialization," until they are converted in such symbolic and material relationships developed within a delimited environment.

The performance has been the way to "spatialize" the urban cueca scene. They have allowed the expansion of symbols and texts associated with cueca music and/in the city, as we can see in *Me gustan los barrios bravos* (Figure 5). In fact, several groups have played in the same places where the old CUC was developed, among them the Slaughterhouse, La Vega, the Rail Station, popular open Markets and La Viseca (a poultry store near the Rail Station), among others. Moreover, they have used those images for their CDs and live productions.

Not coincidentally, almost all of these venues are located in a very similar coordinate set by the convergence of both, historical, and current CUC's lyrics, having as their principal axis an imaginary line that goes from the northwest to the southeast downtown:

This cueca pathway (Figure 6) is not only an imaginary recreation of the musical past but a music topography, where urban cueca is unfolded through regular performances. Geographical and cultural spaces, performances, images, and especially lyrics of this new





**Figure 4.** Map with the old and new venues contained in the urban cueca *Santiago, mi Gran Santiago*.

scene are extended along the city, narrating and recreating vividly and repeatedly those “physical elements of shared meanings” and “intimate topographies connected with people” explained by Pereira (2005).

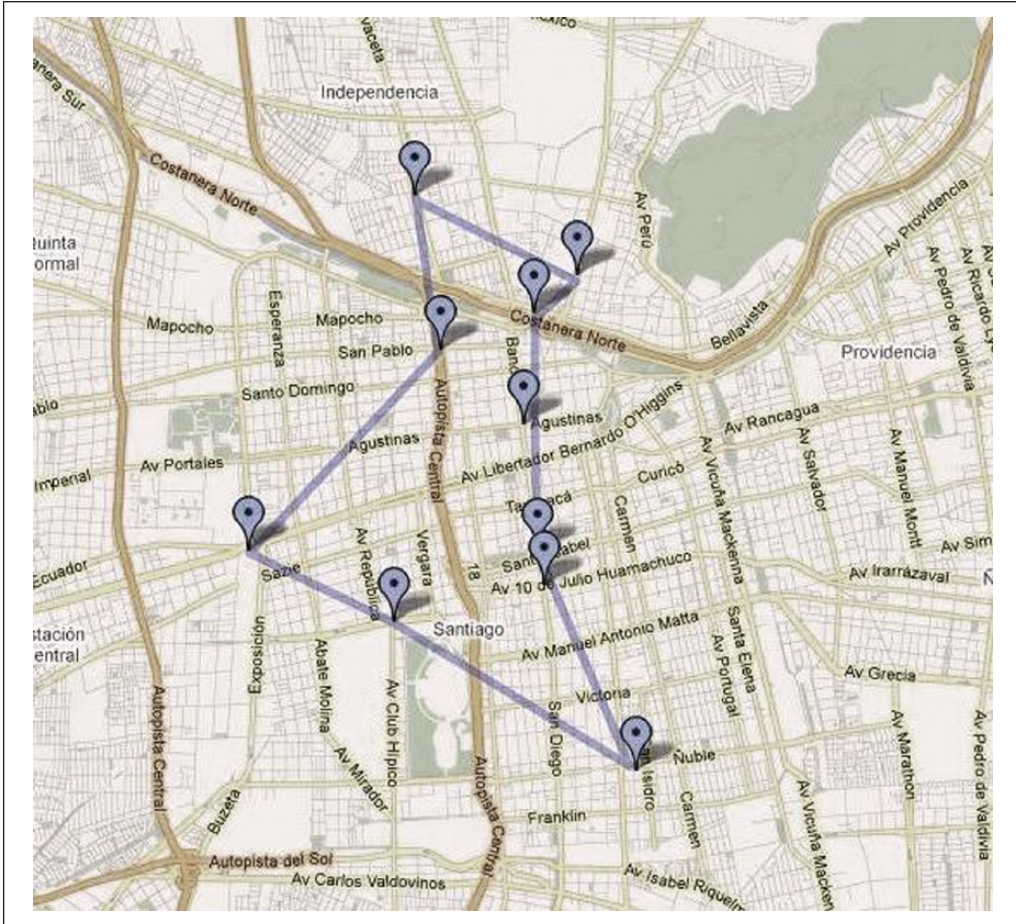
We can conclude that urban cueca scene produces local meanings that are geographically meaningful for audiences, also creating the city and producing a sense of locality. As Sara Cohen (2007, pp. 221-222) argues, popular music can play a role as an urban culture by increasing the sense of shared experiences and the dialogue with the past, “embodying collective memories and traditions that took on a particular significance in a context of social and economic change.” Consequently,

Music thus plays a unique and often hidden role in the social and cultural production of place and, through its peculiar nature, it foregrounds the dynamic, sensual aspects of this process emphasizing, for example, the creation and performance of place through human bodies in action and motion. (Cohen, 1995, p. 445)

## Sociability, Community, and Performance

As I have tried to explain above, CUC lyrics are in a very particular way a history of the city and a narration and memory of downtown venues. But lyrics tell more than just places. If venues and places are mark points and *vivid spaces*, they also closely connect people through musical topographies. Musical territories became social topographies, where the urban cuecas narrate the city forging ties and a sense of friendship. Thus, the social practice of dancing and singing make social cohesion “real,” make sociability material or factual.

The lyrics of the cueca *A punta e' palma las cuecas* (applauding cuecas vibrantly; Table 4)<sup>12</sup> opens one of the most important CUC scene's albums, *Cuecas de Remolienda* by *Los Tricolores* (2003). Its text clearly shows the particular combination of a cheerful sociability through performance and the intimacy of social relationships. Such invoked sociability is sheltered by meeting

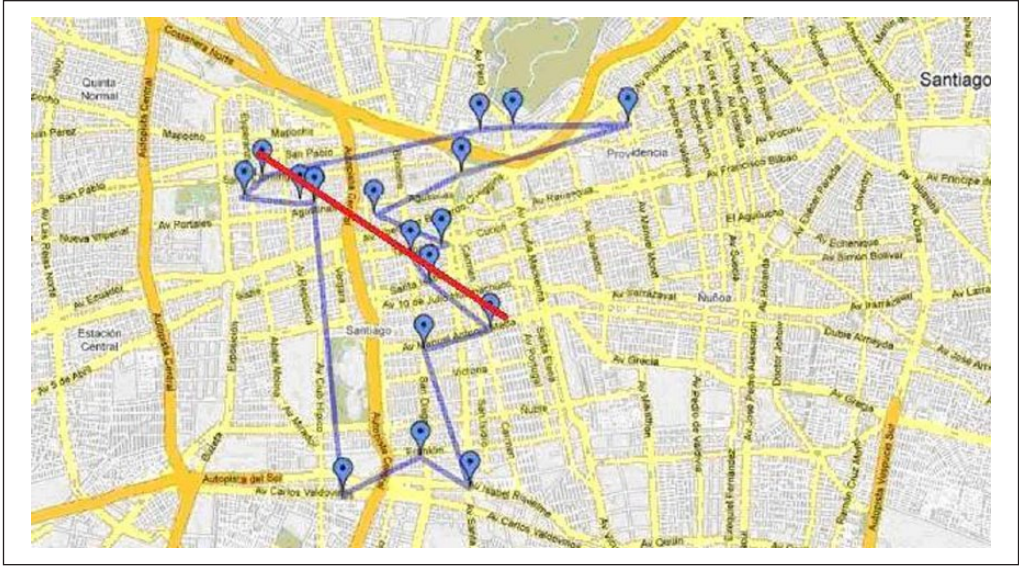


**Figure 5.** Music pathway contained in CUC *Me gustan los barrios bravos*.  
 Note. CUC = Chilean Urban Cueca.

points, where everyone experiments the power of social nets through dancing, playing, or watching urban cueca. It is not only about having communitarian experiences through performances but also to do with bands' capability to produce art in the course of festivity, to find out new "social textures" inside the city. Then, the festive life is updated every week in performances extended into the downtown, spreading the energy of cueca through the urban dwellers. As the cueca musician Bernardo Zamora explained to me in 2008:

There are times for a community where they can live peak or catharsis moments and you can die and it is fine [ . . . ] it becomes something vital [ . . . ] Things just happen. You are in the venue and suddenly cueca starts, pa pa! Tambourines sound, shouts, your legs, you can't stay calm with that! [ . . . ] there is a climax through several cuecas, and then you should stop [ . . . ] it is a cycle: it starts again, even yet it can never finish.<sup>13</sup>

Although the scene claims for public spaces to get involved socially, the other side of this social phenomenon contains an intimate element that should be stressed. Many of the initial bonding created inside the social venues do actually generate real friendships that have potential continuity on time. Regular contact becomes normal and socialization something even necessary.



**Figure 6.** Urban Cueca map, Santiago de Chile 2005 to 2010, axis, and itinerary.

**Table 4.** Cueca A punta e' palma las cuecas (Spanish and English).

A punta e' palma las cuecas	<i>Applauding cuecas vibrantly</i>
O tañando una vihuela	<i>Or strumming the guitar</i>
Al son de concha y platillo	<i>Keeping shell and cymbal beats</i>
O las cucharas soperas	<i>Or the soup spoon time</i>
Hay que noches más lindas	<i>Such a beautiful nights</i>
Dele chilena	<i>Singing chilenas</i>
A falta de instrumentos	<i>Lacking instruments</i>
Las voces suenan	<i>The voices sound</i>
Las voces suenan, si	<i>The voices sound, yes</i>
Dele a la guagua	<i>Play the accordion</i>
Y fiesta donde afloje	<i>No binges where can loosen</i>
doña guitarra	<i>Mrs guitar</i>
Eres bella condena	<i>You are a beautiful fate</i>
Cueca Chilena	<i>Cueca Chilena</i>

*Translation.* Christian Spencer Espinosa.

Comradeship and camaraderie are indeed part of everyday life through cueca. As the urban cueca soloist and cueca teacher Héctor Pavez explains:

I believe people make necessary [the urban cueca] as a personal expression for themselves, a space of joy, a space of motivation, a space of expression, a space of happiness [ . . . ] people go to [the cueca restaurant] El Huaso Enrique on Thursdays, the weekend, because they need it, it's the energy for the week [ . . . ] it's feeding yourself [ . . . ] you feel good because you dance cueca, because cueca feels good, because you feel free and people feel fine with you, people make friendship, make friends, meet somebody.<sup>14</sup>

The continuity of these nets is supported by the scene itself. Hence, CUC lyrics try to reflect and emphasize social networks created in this everyday life (as in the line “Hay que noches más

lindas dele chilena” [such a beautiful nights singing urban cuecas]), where everybody can celebrate indefinitely the social effervescence of being socially integrated playing or singing (as in “A falta de instrumentos las voces suenan” [lacking instruments, the voices sound]). It never stops; it goes on and on because it is an indispensable social bond. Even more, it might be thought as a destiny, like the text suggests with “Eres bella condena, cueca chilena” (you are beautiful fate, cueca chilena). Using Calvina’s words quoted in Cohen (2007, p. 23), the city does not tell the past literally, “but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows. . . . every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.” These lines—which I have called *mark points before*—create an “imaginary” support that helps recreate the past, reminding us memory is not just a passive depository of facts but an active process of creating meaning, as the quoted text “Tus calles tienen historia” (your streets have history) suggests.

Postmodern metropolises have widened symbolic zones that downplayed the supremacy of space over time, creating a new territorialization (Soja, 2008). This new process—the *sociospatial dialectic*—has created new forms and combinations of territorial identity and social spatiality producing more complex human geographies. Paraphrasing Andy Bennett (2005), through urban cueca lyrics, we can see how musical texts mixed with local knowledge and specific local sensibilities can crystallize “particular stories about the local, and impose collectively defined meanings and significance on space” (p. 3).

## Conclusions: Fixing Identities, Imaging Cities

It can be said that CUC texts reclaim all those venues back, demanding something that the Chilean anthropologist José Bengoa (2006) has named as a transition from the *lost community* to the *claimed community*. The urban cueca lyrics create an imaginary of utopia for the Chilean society transforming the sadness of the lost community into an anxiety for “belonging to,” for having a place for “being with” (cf. Correa, Figueroa, Jocelyn-Holt, Rolle, & Vicuña, 2001). It is the sense of loss which becomes a claim of a new “geography of sociability,” a new sense of locality, a reconstruction of the city, of “our places.”

The urban cueca scene produces indeed a sense of local belonging: locality as a space where “People use music to locate themselves in relation to others, just as they find themselves located” (Cohen, 1995, p. 66); locality as “a particular relationship between the spatial, the social, and the conceptual” where places can be imagined (p. 63); locality as a way to produce culture while travelling—while walking around the city drawn by those urban cuecas; locality to signify particular types of places or spaces; locality as a methodology to *create* places and “webs of significance woven through sound” (p. 66).

But locality as a source of urban memory is also a way to criticize the notion of progress and globalization developed in Chile. According to Mattos (2002), ever since the transformation of the city (from the 1970s to the 1990s), Santiago has become a segregated and class-divided urban space, where social inequalities started to be visible and particularly “shameless.” Observed from the CUC lyrics, city has increasingly grown impersonal places and shopping venues, settling anonymous forms of sociability and displacing physical contact and conversations. It is what Valenzuela (2012) calls the “city of exclusion,” where quantity is over quality and difference and social fragmentation are reflected in the urban design. It is the city of the shopping mall and the credit card citizen where “compulsive modernization” creates an “unequal community” instead of a civilian or egalitarian community (Bengoa, 2006, p. 45). It is a postmodern metropolis (Santiago) that has shifted relationships between space, knowledge, and power so that space has been used as a mechanism for subordination and a social control weapon (Soja, 2008).

The CUC lyrics are the counter narrative of the “compulsive modernization.” They are an “intimate” vision of the history of the city and a narration and memory of downtown venues.

They are a deep memory that reflects and emphasizes social networks created in everyday life, a new form of territorial identity and social spatiality, where music (lyrical performance) and human geographies are “vividly” connected (community).

I believe the past two decades have been marked by something that the Chilean sociologist Jorge Larraín (2001) has described as the *fading or blurring of Chilean identity* due to an anxious necessity for “modernization”. The anxiety of progress has eradicated the *sociospatial dialectic* of the city, destroying the vividness of the urban corners, modernizing its dark zones with shopping centers, and changing urban plans for neighbors. In a certain way, the city segregates impersonally, suppresses, impoverishes.

But on the other side, a revalorization of popular culture and the cultural memory of the country have produced a new downtown territorialization. Whereas the city segregates, suppresses, and impoverishes, urban cueca (as popular culture) gets people together, socializes, expands, and finally reconstruct a (real or imaginary) city. The urban cueca lyrics testify this process. Caroline Bithell (2006) explains this idea in a different way which is romantic but also quite appropriate for this argument:

the traditions of the past offer a welcome refuge from the complexities and confusions of modern life, serving as an anchor in the storm that threatens to tear identities from their roots [ . . . ] In reaction to the ensuing sense of dislocation, local communities have turned their attention to reclaiming, restoring or revitalizing rituals from the past as a means of reforging a community spirit and investing individual action with meaning. (p. 8)

The CUC scene is contributing to that “claimed community” redefining the space and putting fictional or real places in the memory of the city (*mark points*), turning upside down the created imaginary of a *modern* city. Indeed, the imagined city is totally different: it is a common and public space for sociability where performance’s energy opens neighborhoods for public festivities, reflecting, and emphasizing those social networks created in everyday life. It is a vivid place where present and past can be confused easily, it stimulates identity by preserving cultural memory, it gives a sense of locality offering mappings of meaning, bringing closer the utopia of a new place.

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### **Notes**

1. Subsequent documentaries assumed the same aesthetic from this point onward. See Parra (2007-2010), Romero (2009), Videla (2010), and Retamal y Valdés (2010).
2. In terms of performance, I understand CUC as the partial or complete work developed in live music environments or CD recordings by Los Chinganos, Los Trukeros, Los Santiaguinos, Los Tricolores,

- La Gallera, 3 × 7 Veintiuna, Las Capitalinas, Las Niñas, and Las Peñascazo (unavailable now). Nonetheless, in my analysis I also consider both Los Chileneros and Los Centricos (unavailable now), because they are stylistically and aesthetically connected with the new scene, becoming one of the most important references to young musicians and audiences.
3. There is an extended bibliography about what types of cueca are representative in Chile by region and especially by choreography. See Spencer (2011).
  4. A general approach to Chilean popular music in the 1980s can be read in Godoy and González (1995). About the marginalization of the *cueca brava* (literally, brave cueca), see Alegría (1981). For a study on the circulation of marginalized cuecas during the dictatorship, see Jordán and Rojas (2009), and for nationalization of cueca and its consequences during Pinochet's regime, see Spencer (2009).
  5. For a short history of the Chilean cueca in English, see Spencer (2014), for a chronological history in Spanish, see Spencer (2011).
  6. The performed events of cueca—called *cuecazos*—are singing and dance meetings held on regular basis—usually two or three in a week—that take place in local venues where live music is played. People taking part in the *cuecazos* sing or play instruments, while live music is being performed, a feature that makes of this spaces festive moments of intense sociability and audience participation. However, sometimes *cuecazos* can also become intimate moments of communitarian singing or even singing competitions to prove who can remember more lyrics in a single night.
  7. Performed by Los Santiaguinos in *La Cueca Capitalina* (2000), Track 2.
  8. *Las Capitalinas, Cuecas para Chile* (2002), Independent, Track 4.
  9. One of the murals painted in La Piojera (by Los Oberoles) included a guitar and a couple dancing cueca with a handkerchief in the face. Pictures available at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/oberoles/4495006736/sizes/m/in/photostream/>
  10. *La cueca brava, El Folklore Urbano IV series, EMI Odeón (SLDC 35091), 1968, Track 2.*
  11. Other examples of this kind of street or place-CUC are *Las Calles de mi Santiago* and *La picada de los cuequeros* (Los Santiaguinos), *El quinto patio* (Los Trukeros), *Me gusta la Calle Lingue*, and *Me gusta la Alameda* (Los Chinganeros), *Recoleta*, *Carmen*, *Lira* (Los Chileneros and Las Capitalinas), and *Yo soy dueño del Barón* (Los Chileneros).
  12. Translation of lyrics are all mine, as well as the interview texts.
  13. Bernardo Zamora, Cueca musician and producer, interview with the author, October 1, 2008, Valparaíso.
  14. Héctor Pavez, interview with the author, Santiago, August 20, 2008.

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