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Mestizaje and African heritage in Afro-Caribbean music, Veracruz, Mexico

By Christian Rinaudo

Rolando, a young cultural promoter for the Veracruz Cultural Institute (IVEC), deplores the fact that the public only sees the annual Afro-Caribbean International Festival as an occasion to enjoy the performances. This public clearly constructs a symbolic boundary between "them" (the Afro-Caribbean performers) and "us" (the people of Veracruz, Mexico). As he explained to me, "The people who saw the concerts would say: 'Hey, what about going to watch the blacks dancing', whereas they themselves could also be identified as colored people."

This comment is rather significant as it highlights the way in which the issue of African heritage in Mexico is perceived. As Christina Sue points out, "during the presidential regime of Porfirio Díaz (1877-1880, 1884-1911), racialized categories were incorporated into the nation-building process and the *mestizo* was deemed the national symbol of Mexico" (Sue 2009:115). After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), José Vasconcelos developed the concept of 'Cosmic race,' which further reinforced the need for cohesion. (Vasconcelos 1925). In doing so, Vasconcelos echoed the *Indigenismo* of Manuel Gamio (Gamio 1992) and laid the groundwork for 'integrationist' cultural nationalism (Hoffmann and Rinaudo 2014). Since then, it has been widely assumed that this national ideology of *mestizaje* has helped generate a strong pride in mixed-race status among the citizens of Mexico.

In Mexico, the issue of mestizaje has mainly arisen in debates about the process of assimilation that was implemented during the 19th century and the early 20th century. Mestizaje first concerned Indians and Spanish people, and as such, the issue came to prominence when the discussion turned to the question of Indians. Starting in the 1980s, a relative re-Indianization was carried out on the basis of a formal recognition of the Indian population. At the same time, the national ideology of mestizaje was also considered. Although the ideology of mestizaje was interpreted as a motor for forced cultural homogenization, and as the key element of a national narrative, it ignored the importance of other demographic phenomena (Viqueira 2010). In particular, populations of African origin were largely disregarded until the end of the 20th century.[1] In 1989, the national program, "Our Third Root," (*Nuestra Tercera Raîz*) was launched, and various academic initiatives began to reveal the importance and diversity of the contribution by people of African origin to the Mexican nation (Carroll 2001; Hoffmann 2004; Martínez Montiel 1994; Muhammad 1996; Velázquez and Correa 2005; Vinson III and Vaughn 2004).

It is also since the 1980s that musical traditions associated with this African heritage have been examined in Mexico, first with a short article on afromestiza music (Moedano 1980), then with more complete ethnomusicological studies dealing with this issue and detailing the geographical regions and musical styles in which the African diasporic legacies were identifiable (Chamorro 1996; García de León 2002; Pérez Fernández 1990; Ruiz Rodríguez 2007). In these studies, Afro-Mexican music and dance are seen as a contribution to the national process that Aguirre Beltrán called "Afro-mestizaje" (Gonzalez 2004; González 2010; Pérez Fernández 2003), or like a form of resistance that survived the Holy Inquisition of New Spain (Díaz-Sánchez and Hernández 2013; Hernández 2014). Still, few studies have sought to understand the social uses of music and dance categories, and stereotypes linked to the African legacy. As Rolando's comments about people's reactions to

the Afro-Caribbean Festival suggest, symbolic boundaries are indeed important. Therefore, I will use an analytical framework based on symbolic boundaries to examine mestizaje and African heritage in music and dance. Symbolic boundaries are "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Lamont and Molnár 2001:168). As such, symbolic boundaries are tools with which individuals and groups carve out definitions of reality. They are the outcome of the representation of a social world that music and dance enable us to document. I will focus in particular on cultural public policies and on the discourses and practices of performers.

An empirical approach

In contemporary Veracruz, despite its long history as a port of arrival and trade of enslaved Africans[2], there are neither collective activities aimed at forging a consciousness of belonging to a common social group that would self-identify as black or Afro-descendent, nor organizations trying to speak and act on behalf of populations of African origin, as is the case in other regions of Mexico (Lewis 2012; Lara Millán 2008). Here, the idea of the existence of a specific group of Afro-Veracruzan type holds little meaning in the urban areas, where inhabitants mostly identify themselves via class distinctions or regional references (Hoffmann 2008). And the term *jarocho*, which is used to designate—often indiscriminately—inhabitants of the south of the State of Veracruz, the Sotavento coast and the city of Veracruz itself, refers more to the mestizaje issue and its various Spanish, indigenous and African roots, than to a putative black identity.

And yet in recent years it is in this context that the popular music of Veracruz and its region has highlighted a black or African cultural dimension. On analyzing this process, one first has to question the accuracy of the totalizing terms that describe a popular culture as black or African. In a famous text, Stuart Hall explains that the "black" from which a black cultural policy originates should not be considered as an essence, but as "an ensemble of distinct and historically defined black experiences that contributed to producing an alternative repertoire" (Hall 1992:21-33). For all this, he does not question his own use of the terms "black repertoire," "black experience," "black expressiveness," "black aesthetics," and "black subjectivity" when observing the diverse character that such subjectivity could bring with it: "It is on the diversity of the black experience and not its homogeneity that we must focus our creative attention." In other words, the diversity Hall refers to is limited to the "variety of black subjective disparities," which depends on the black subject's social location, i.e. gender, class, sexual orientation, etc. So, Hall's questioning should be rephrased in the manner of Peter Wade, when in his study he wonders in what way the Colombian coast's commercial music is "black" (Wade 2000; Wade 2011) or, as formulated in answers and comments on Phillip Tagg's open letter (Raibaud 2009; Tagg 1989), or else in the heading of an issue of *Volume!* journal (Anonymous 2011) which attempts to deconstruct racial categories in music: "Is there such a thing as black music?"

Answering this question entails looking into social uses of categories and stereotypes linked to African heritage. In contemporary and urban Mexico, such uses are deemed to be those that appear in the historical transformation processes of mestizaje and regional identities, but also those that emerge in concrete situations such as can be observed in urban areas where the ethnic dimension is not always present, and can also take different meanings depending on the context, ranging from an improved image to a condemnation, and from the expression of a spiritual quality to the manifestations of exclusion.

With this in mind, the investigation carried out between 2007 and 2012 in Veracruz consisted of studying when, how and why ethnic boundaries are traced, maintained, made known, asserted, denied and praised. In particular, I looked into the history of categories while taking into account the specificities of those using them: academics, representatives of cultural institutions, cultural promoters, musicians, dancers, etc. The aim was to report on the conditions of emergence, diffusion, and appropriation or rejection of categories such as black, brown (*moreno*), Afro-mestizo, Afro-descendent, Afro-Caribbean, not including those designating local categories such as jarocho, to mention but one; for the latter, Ricardo Pérez Montfort clearly showed the conditions in which its primary use as a category of mestizaje has been forgotten (Pérez Montfort 2007).

My ethnographic approach also takes into account contexts, or moments of more or less solid

expressions of groupness[3], which can be defined in terms of culture, i.e., the social uses of categories linked to the color of the skin (Glenn 2009), or to a putative African origin: the "third root," when defining cultural policies, the actors who insist on the African roots of the city and its inclusion within the Caribbean area, and the individual and collective displays of a relationship with Africa and the Caribbean. Particular attention is also paid to the management of physical appearance (Lyman and Douglass 1973), to the different ways of walking, dancing and dressing which draw on globalized and relocated registers of what can be socially defined as a black culture (Sansone 2003). In this approach I consider bodily expression to be a key tool for understanding social reality. Dance, along with the impression management of performers, the social aesthetic, and corporal practices and representations, are viewed in their mutual interplay and transformation.

Thus, my analysis was based on the hypothesis that such phenomena, although at times lacking substance and inconsistent in certain situations, in fact play an important role in maintaining ethnic boundaries. Apart from cases where a consciousness of identity forms against a backdrop of the ideology of mestizaje, other relationships between mestizaje and ethnicity can be observed and are also socially important (Rinaudo 2012). For example, there are those which develop into power relationships, caused by the distinctions that are forever emphasized and reproduced between the "smart set": light skinned, well dressed, living in residential neighborhoods, patronizing trendy restaurants and discotheques, and the poor: ordinary people, Indians, blacks, peasants and workers, as referred to by Guillermo Bonfil Batalla when describing the divide between "imaginary Mexico." which is modern, with an urban culture, cosmopolitan, heir to the Spanish conquest and its civilization projects, and "deep Mexico" (Bonfil Batalla 1990). Otherwise, the relationship between mestizaje and ethnicity will always invoke the consideration, justification and reassertion of the idea of mestizaje and the categorization and organization of its various roots and related populations into a hierarchy.

One of the methodological approaches adopted to tackle the issues was to restore the social meaning given by those concerned to ethnic definitions from among other possible definitions (by gender, generation, social status, etc.). In other words, one has to take Moerman's words seriously whereby "ethnicity is not [...] a skin in which individuals are sewn, but a garment among others in their wardrobe; it is not 'a full time job', but a practical task which is sometimes carried out, a role which is sometimes played, a reflex sometimes provoked" (Moerman 1994:135). From this point of view, in an urban environment marked by the presence of a middle class that endeavors to make the social distance vis-à-vis working classes visible, another important principle for the investigation was to take into account the fact that ethnic definitions are often embedded in a logic of social distinction and responses to social distinctions.

Therefore, the purpose of this urban fieldwork was to highlight how the black or African cultural dimension in popular music is handled from a sociological perspective. This perspective enables us to detect what is occurring in concrete situations and yet it is sufficiently panoramic to allow us to perceive how ethnic definitions are linked to other social identifications. From a strictly methodological viewpoint it is necessary to draw on all kinds of sources in the various areas in which distinctions linked to the color of the skin, physical features and the attribution of cultural characteristics are made conspicuous. During the fieldwork, I spent much time observing what E. Goffman called *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1956) in the urban scenes and the cultural practices of the inhabitants, tourists, and passers-by. I gave special attention to the activities of the musicians and dancers, to the attitude of the public and to the social interactions in street festivals, club performances and private parties. Using my experience in recording, and my experience as a respected ethnographer and live sound engineer, I was accepted into the various musical environments of the city: the son jarocho***[4]*** ensembles which gathered each month on the occasion of the *fandangos****[5]*** organized in the Cultural Center of Popular Music, called CaSon; the *son montuno* and *danzón* musicians who played for tourists and aficionados in the restaurants and public places of the city; salsa groups performing in festivals and teaching in the Veracruz Cultural Institute (IVEC); *reggaeton* artists gigging in the nightclubs of the seacoast; *chunchaca****[6]*** bands playing in suburban private parties, etc. Initially, my ethnographical work consisted in participating in the daily life of the cultural promoters, policy makers, music and dance performers, in attending the rehearsals and recording sessions, and in contributing to the life experiences of these actors. Next, I started to conduct more formal interviews with the aim of retracing the life paths of each of the

above, thus acquiring a sensitive, even intimate form of knowledge (Le Menestrel 2012).

At first, it was mainly at the level of cultural policies described in terms of “third root” that the issue of the African presence was debated and specific positions were asserted by the various local actors. Hence, after going over the main elements that contributed to the implementation of a cultural policy embracing the Afro-Caribbean dimension, I will look at the narratives of Veracruz’s musicians before carrying out the ethnographic description of a cultural program. This is to try to understand how the African dimension of mestizaje is expressed.

Implementing an Afro-Caribbean cultural policy

In his work on popular culture and Mexican nationalistic stereotypes, Ricardo Pérez Montfort clearly showed how in Mexico, in the years 1920-1930, the construction of national cultural symbols was achieved at the expense of the wide diversity of forms of regional expression:

“The diversity had to sacrifice itself when looking for the representation of the ‘typically Mexican’. [...] The Charro and the China Poblana dancing a *jarabe tapatío* progressively became the Mexican image par excellence. This image seemed to be a synthesis of ‘Mexicanness.’ Huastecos and Jarochos, Yucatecos and Guerrerenses, Jalisquillos and *norteños* fought to feature in the national representation. […] But at the time of defining the ‘Mexican people’ itself, they were under the yoke of the Charro and the China, and of Mariachi music” (Pérez Montfort 2003:130].

The years 1970-1980 marked the end of that pre-revolution period and of a centralist and homogenizing cultural nationalism (Jiménez 2006). It was the beginning of a process of cultural decentralization spurred on by the federal authorities, and the setting up of Departments, Institutes and Councils of Culture in all the country’s States. The Veracruz Cultural Institute (IVEC) was created in 1987 as “a decentralized organization with a legal personality and its own holdings,” “with headquarters in the port of Veracruz,” and with the general mission “to support, to promote and to spread cultural activity by means of the affirmation and consolidation of local, regional and national values, and by giving impulse to the arts”[7]. Following the foundation of the IVEC, the directors encouraged a definition for the main trends of the public policy, and managed the implementation of a decentralized cultural policy in the State of Veracruz (García Díaz and Guadarrama Olivera 2012). The outcome of this process was to promote an Afro-Caribbean definition of the region that could be identified as such by three aspects.

The first aspect was to foster rural son jarocho and fandangos, both characteristic of the “Afro-Andalusian Caribbean” (García de León 1992). The origin of these practices, which have become a widespread cultural component in the country, goes back to colonial times. Son jarocho, often described as the outcome of the mixing of three roots—Spanish (baroque and Andalusian music), African (rhythms and percussion) and Indian (the themes)—underwent a process of commercialization and folklorization in the 1940s that caused important changes, both as regards music (increased tempo, instruments transformed, etc.) and as regards the representation of what imposed itself as an element of national folklore, dropping the historical relationship with “blackness” along the way:

“The dress and accessories worn by those who represented the so-called ‘jarochos’ had no longer anything to do with the rural world and the coast’s popular areas. From then on, the ‘jarocho dress’ was a very elaborate and costly spotless white outfit similar to those worn by the hispanophile elites of the port and Veracruz old haciendas. [...] Such an image of son jarocho imposed itself definitely in 1940 in the repertoire of stereotyped regional representations when a group from Veracruz took the words and music of La Bamba as a leitmotiv for a political campaign between 1945 and 1946” (Pérez Montfort 2001:156-157).

In this context, according to I. Cardona, “young musicians, historians and anthropologists, in their majority originating from the region, began to look for and to remove from forgetfulness the old rural and non-professional *jaraneros* who are well-known in the traditional fandangos” (Cardona 2006: 396). Gilberto Gutiérrez, leader of the Mono Blanco group, and Director during this period of the Traditional Music Department at the IVEC, implemented the policy of removing the commercial *son* jarocho and promoting a son jarocho based on the idea of combining the three roots. The *Sones*

jarochos LP, recorded by Mono Blanco with Arcadio Hidalgo, a bohemian musician who was then the focus of renewed attention, is a good example of this process of reviving the almost lost rural style of son jarocho playing and dancing.

***Sones jarochos* Arcadio Hidalgo y el grupo Mono Blanco, LP, Discos Pentagrama, LPP-050**

The second aspect of this policy was to restore the prestige of *danzón* and *son montuno* in Veracruz—two musical and dance styles of Cuban origin introduced at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century via the permanent communication that existed between the ports of Havana and Veracruz, and also via the presence of a small Cuban community. This led to their being quickly adopted in Veracruz's working-class areas and city squares (García Díaz 2011) to the extent that they became one of the city's main attractions mentioned in tourist guides. This movement, initiated at the end of the 1980s, made it possible a few years later to create a Son Montuno Festival, then the Festival Internacional Agustín Lara, as a major event, and also to organize numerous other activities aimed at showcasing the artistic manifestations of what was called the Veracruz Afro-Caribbean tradition by certain culture promoters (Figueroa Hernández 2002), such as the *Noches de danzón*, the Afro-Cuban dance and percussion classes, and the salsa, *son* and *danzón* workshops.

Poster of the First Son Montuno Festival, 1996 (personal archive)

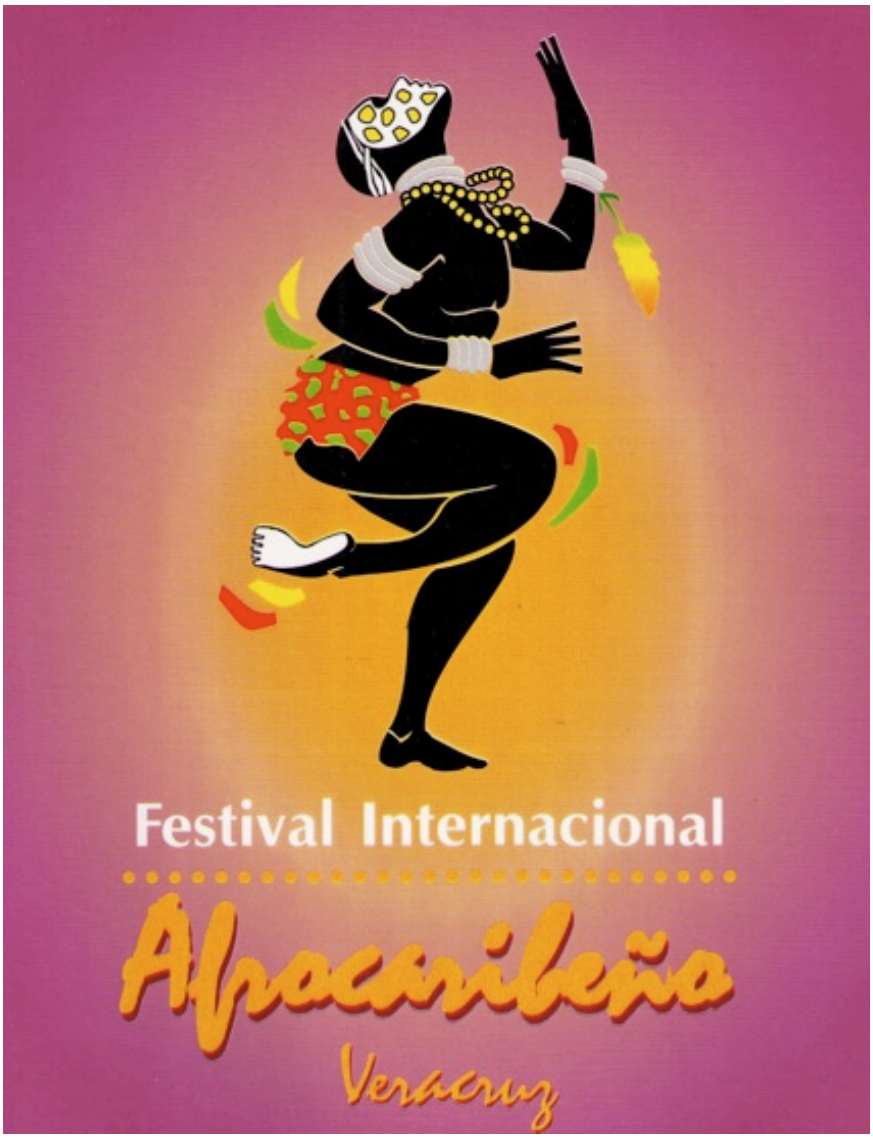
Finally, the third aspect of this policy was to initiate an academic reflection on the Caribbean region and its African heritage by associating it with a national program launched in 1989 to promote the "third root" of Mexican mestizaje. This move began with two academic conferences held in 1989 and 1990, entitled "*Veracruz también es Caribe"* (Castañeda 2004; Muñoz Mata 1990). These events were organized by the IVEC to encourage, via the presentation of research work, a representation of Veracruz as a region that had cultural leanings towards the Caribbean. According to Y. Juárez Hernández, manager of the Caribbean Studies Center of the IVEC, "Veracruz has participated in a common Caribbean culture that is reflected in customs, music, dance, feeding, rites, and in a cultural syncretism product of the Indigenous, black and European mestizaje" (Juárez Hernández 1990: 7). At the same time, a similar process occurred in Cancún, in the State of Quintana Roo, as early as 1988, with what was called the International Caribbean Cultural Festival. But what became a characteristic of Veracruz's cultural policy was to have associated this regional inclusion in the Caribbean with the Our Third Root national program, whose objective was to study and enhance the image of the African presence in Mexico (Martínez Montiel 1993).

This unifying of the definition of a cultural policy focused both on the inclusion of Veracruz within the "Caribbean cultural area" (Juárez Hernández 2006) and on the local implementation of this program, which in 1994 resulted in the creation of the Afro-Caribbean International Festival, considered at the time as a "national priority project" and backed by the government of the State of Veracruz (Rinaudo 2011). The presentation in the first edition of the Festival justified this move as follows:

"The emergence of social groups in the cultural life of the country, with new proposals and alternatives that respond to the consolidation and creation of more and more complex cultural identities, confirms the multicultural and multiethnic nature of our Nation. The recognition of new

realities between Indigenous and racially mixed groups in both rural and urban contexts, in the cultural formation of Latin America, entails the recognition of such deep and ancestral roots as the Indian and European roots: our Third Root, of African origin, which was formed during the European colonization, by means of the incorporation of black slaves into the conquered territories and which, when mixed with the rest of the population, contributed new and rich cultural elements that can enhance the continent, particularly with the magnificent contributions from the Caribbean. In our country, a black influence exists in states like Guerrero, Yucatan, Oaxaca and Tabasco, even in states of the north of the country like Coahuila. But perhaps the greatest influence is in Veracruz. Hence, it is extremely important to encourage action that pushes us toward Afro-Caribbean integration through the recognition of common cultural roots that unite us and fortify us as countries, when we value and incorporate our national project, our Third Root… our black origin."[8]

Thus, this festival is the outcome of the implementation of a cultural policy, which in turn is the result of academic reflection carried out during that pivotal period of the history of Mexico and Latin America in the course of which the issues of diversity, multiculturalism, cultural heritage, memory and recognition of minorities, decentralization and cultural globalization appeared in public debates and events. This policy is characterized by a deep ambivalence: on the one hand, it insists on the recognition of an African heritage which is supposed to be part of "us" ("our" "third root" of national mestizaje); on the other hand, it dramatizes, in the iconography and in the choice of the shows, a blackness of a distant "other" with whom the local population does not identify.



Poster of the Third Afro-Caribbean Festival, 1996 (personal archive)

It is possible to concur with C. Sue that such a policy of institutional promotion of the “third root” has not succeeded locally in forging a community feeling based on Afro-descent (Sue 2013). But we can also advance the hypothesis that all those years during which the “third root of Mexican mestizaje” was promoted via academic conferences, exhibitions and numerous concerts mixing guest groups from the entire Caribbean area and local music groups were not ineffective. For example, from the outset, the various actors involved in the implementation of this program unanimously agreed to criticize the dominant position of the local conservative elite that denied any form of recognition of a common heritage linked to African origins and Veracruz’s cultural proximity with the Caribbean. This is explained well by the IVEC’s first director, Ida Rodríguez Prampolini:

“When we inaugurated the first exhibition on the relationship between Veracruz and Cuba where the black population was obviously prominent, my own childhood friends, who were damned reactionary, criticized me: ‘Why are you doing this? What we have tried to forget, you come and remind us.’ And that was how the Veracruz upper class reacted, all with their curly hair, all of black race from three generations back and denying it, it was awful and really upsetting” (Interview, May 2008).

From this point of view, thirty years of government policies centered on rural son jarocho and the tradition of fandangos, on Afro-Cuban music, on the Caribbean as a specific cultural area and on the “third root of mestizaje”, have profoundly modified the cultural legitimization criteria. Furthermore, they have helped the area to move beyond a historical period (1930-1970) characterized by the denial of African heritage and by initiatives to whiten the jarocho identity’s stereotypes, to a period where the African root and mestizaje now form part of the representation of local society.

Mestizaje and African heritage in discourses on Afro-Caribbean music

Contemporary local historiography accurately describes the various influences which have contributed to forging cultural expressions, such as fandango and son jarocho in the “Afro-Andalusian Caribbean” (centered on cattle and animal husbandry, but not removed from city life[9]), and an urban popular culture characterized by the appropriation of Cuban music (*danzón*, *son montuno*, *bolero*, etc.) and more widely, Afro-Caribbean music (Malcomson 2010; Figueroa Hernández 1996).

The impulse of this new standard aimed at enhancing the image of African heritage and *mestizaje* has resulted in a certain ambivalence with respect to the inclusion/exclusion of blackness. What can we learn from the discourses of the region’s musicians? What is their awareness of this heritage? What meaning do they attribute to it? How do they express it in their own musical projects?

For example, Gilberto Gutiérrez, leader of the Mono Blanco group that initiated the movement to restore the traditional son jarocho, explains what these questions mean to him:

“In the eighties, it was very important to become aware of the “third root,” as it is called nowadays, but not at the time. Don Arcadio[10], who was black, was not perceived as such, perhaps because of the visual consciousness people had of son at the time, perhaps because all that was officially thought of as a white world and because, let’s say, that racially speaking, the existence of blacks was sidestepped [...]. And so we started becoming aware of this and feeling that we had African roots... and I don’t remember how it exactly happened, but suddenly we began speaking about it and saying that son jarocho, and flamenco, and African music... in fact we didn’t know much about what we were saying, but at least we began to be aware of all that, of the fact that Africa existed. ... And when the *Al primer canto del gallo**[11]*** record was released, we streamlined our music by using fewer string instruments and leaving only percussion, as a way of assuming the African aspect and to make it sound African...” (Interview, January 2009).

This quotation bears testament to Gutiérrez’s need to embrace African heritage and be rid of the cliché of a “white world” associated with the jarocho culture. To undertake this legacy and “make the music sound African” was an opportunity to unwhiten son jarocho.

This issue is also prevalent in the career of Patricio Hidalgo, another musician who has become

essential to the movement for restoring traditional son jarocho; he is Don Arcadio Hidalgo's grandson and has initiated a cultural project called Afrojarocho:

"Blacks have played an important part in the history of Mexico, and not only in the Sotavento region. ... We have Yanga who can be said to have been the first black liberator of the Americas, we have also Malanga blacks near the town of Veracruz, my grandfather Arcadio Hidalgo who lived through the revolution, with his poetry, his jarana, his playing fandango ... my grandfather's father was also black, he sang *décimas* and played *jarana* ... my father was also a musician and was also black ... so, there is this black element in the family ... for example, people said that my grandfather Arcadio was the last black troubadour in the Sotavento ... so, what do we do with our Afrojarocho project? [...] We appropriate the subject which has been ignored in order to debate it by playing, singing..."[12]

The subject Patricio Hidalgo is appropriating in this project is not only the long ignored presence of a population of African origin in the region, but also the inclusion of son jarocho and fandangos on a path of social revolt going back to the time of slave rebellions. What also comes out of this project is the recovery of a musical form, the *conga*, which is described as being part of the region's cultural heritage and as an additional piece to include in this heritage of social activism and collective mobilization:

"The conga is a genre which has remained alive in a small repertoire... We have the Conga del Viejo... which had lost its words and conga rhythm... we wrote new words, we gave it back its rhythm and accompanied it with jarana, tambourine, quijada and marimbol in a group that we formed and that was called Chuchumbé... And how did the Conga del Viejo come into being? According to Francisco Rivera Ávila, known as Paco Píldora, a Veracruz chronicler, it was composed collectively by dock laborers in the port of Veracruz, as an action of social protest [...] because they lived in the worst social conditions and were exploited, and during the Christmas festivities, they used to go round demanding better living conditions to the rhythm of conga, the Conga del Viejo [...]. We see at the moment that people are interested in the conga... in Oaxaca, a conga was composed also as a protest against the situation Mexico is in [...]"[13]

Patricio Hidalgo y el Afrojarocho

Video: *Patricio Hidalgo y el Afrojarocho*, Sacbé Production, Mexico, 2012

It is interesting to note that although this narrative about the origins of son jarocho may, as in the cases mentioned here, insist on its African heritage by giving it a particular meaning, it is nowadays presented in the many festivals, fandangos and workshops held in Mexico, the United States and Europe as a practice derived from the mixing of Spanish colonizers, African slaves and their descendents, and the region's indigenous populations. In this sense, projects attempting to present this music as more African or to explore the mix of Afro-Caribbean sounds present in both son and conga[14] have been designed to include this practice within the framework of a popular fusion occurring in the Afro-Andalusian Caribbean area rather than to try to make it black music.

This way of emphasizing the African dimension of a popular and anti-establishment mestizaje, which is characteristic of the region, can be found in the discourse of Veracruz salsa[15] and son montuno musicians who, since the Afro-Caribbean Festival was created, have started using categories that underline this heritage while continuing to associate the term salsa with the concept of the commercial music put forward by the North American recording industry at the beginning of the seventies. For example, Cheo, a *Son de esquina* pianist, who I met in the IVEC music Master classes, relates how the term imposed itself as a category of mestizaje even before this type of music was defined as Afro-Caribbean:

"In April 1982, I was fortunate to attend a show here in Veracruz by the Sonora Veracruz and Melón who had invited Johnny Pacheco, and I was able to listen to the interview he gave on the radio where he said at the time about the definition of the term salsa: 'we in New York are dealing with so many ethnic groups, so many races, that to be able to market the name of something which encompasses everything, we gave it the name salsa, and from now on, salsa encompasses all forms of native music from Venezuela, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico'. [...] Nowadays, you'll meet traditionalists who will tell you, 'No, that's Afro-Caribbean,' and if you tell them, 'But it's salsa,' they tell you 'Yes, but it's Afro-Caribbean.' ... Why Afro-Caribbean? Because nearly everything was born in the Caribbean via the African slaves who arrived and settled there, and from there the Afro-Caribbean was created." (Interview, January 2008).

Gonzalo, the percussionist from the same music group as Cheo, describes himself as *moreno* (brown) and introduces himself as a person from a working-class background who spent his childhood in a working-class neighborhood in the north of Veracruz. He provides details about the aspects of the Mexican context in which the *salsero* movement was born and explains:

"For me, personally, the fact that this kind of music is played sits alongside the idea of street corner, of 'salsa brava'... because when I heard what made a group like Las Estrellas de Fanya[16], who worked out the name 'salsa', come into being, I was fascinated and I understood the need for the Latin American people to express themselves in this way. [...] It's what we are ... because here in Mexico sometimes it seems that there is not even a definition of a mixed race. ... White is 100% white, black is 100% black and Indian is 100% Indian, and what of all of us who are neither white, nor black, nor Indian? What are we? We are nothing? Because I am neither white, nor black, nor Indian, I am a bit of all these [...] and therefore, just like salsa which is a mix, that's our race." (Interview, January 2008).

These words help us to understand how various dimensions are linked together in the issue of mestizaje. The first refers to asserting a form of cultural expression with various influences, yet marked by its African heritage. Here, the term salsa, often disparaged by an intellectual elite who point to the commercial side, gives its name to one of the aspects of this transnational cultural movement in that it does not attempt to set black music and white music against each other, and it fully embraces this mix as experimented with in Latin American working-class neighborhoods. As for the Afro-Caribbean label, it also stresses a cultural heritage bound to the history of the slave trade. In other words, the African cultural heritage is what gives this mix a special color.

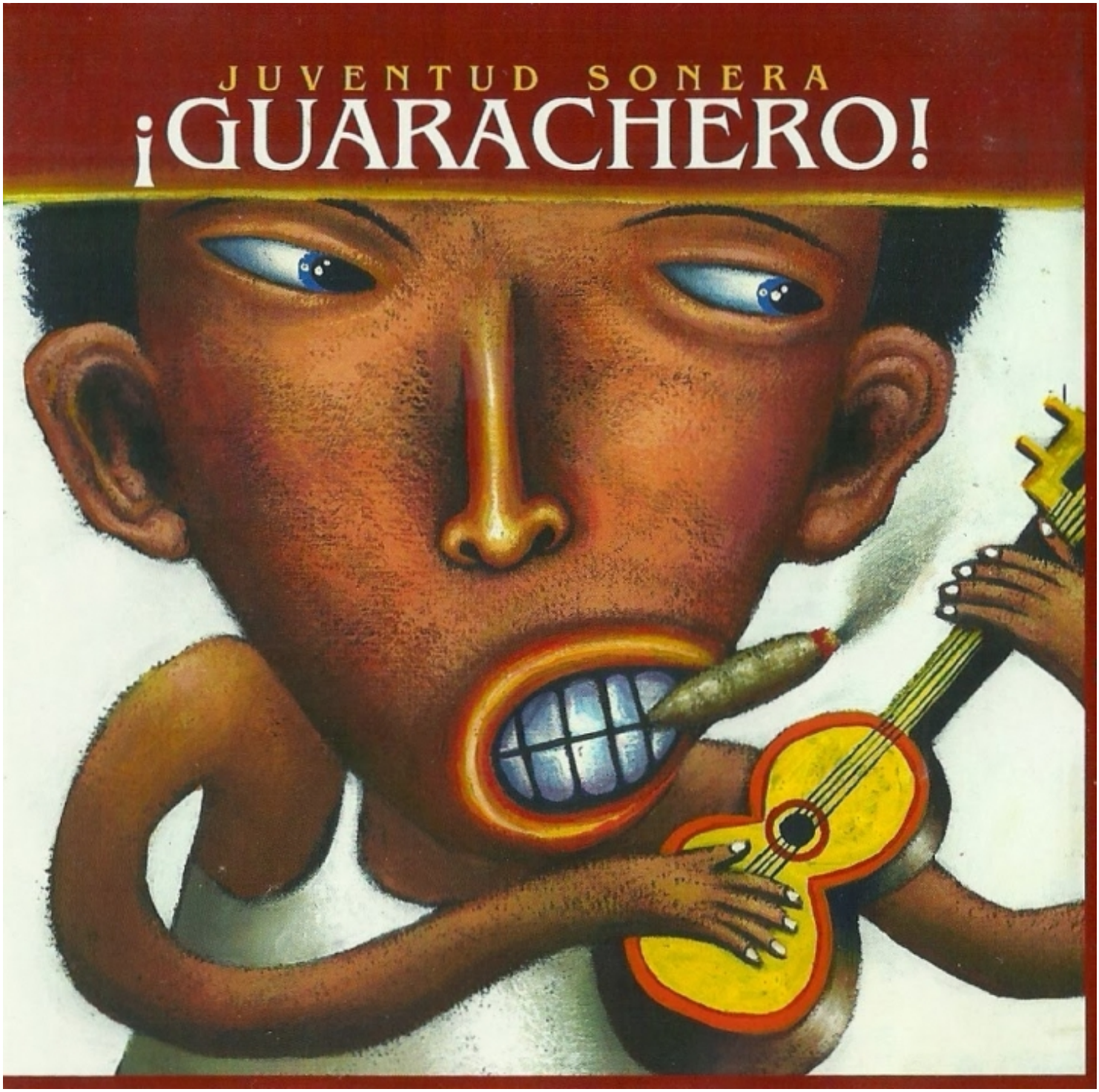
But at the same time, Gonzalo's words raise another question, formulated in terms of identity ("what we are"). Here, it is no longer a question of mestizaje, but of the existence of a *mestizo* population

resulting from the mix, referred to here as the identification of Gonzalo as “moreno*”* (Sue 2009), and that the color of the skin between the polarization of white and black makes the person “invisible” (Raibaud 2009:171). Hence, Gonzalo’s analysis is an attempt to link the cultural mix and the racial mix (“I’m neither white, nor black, nor Indian”), and to adopt at the same time the “not very commendable” African influences of this music and the fact of being part of a “we” that is neither white, nor Indian, nor black, but according to his formula, “a bit of all these.”

Expressions of African heritage and symbolic boundaries

This emphasis on African and Afro-Caribbean heritage, and on mestizaje, can also be observed in urban public places where the performances of musicians and dancers can play on these different roots and the social issues they arouse. In order to try to understand this phenomenon, I will examine a cultural event called *Noches de callejón,* which took place every weekend between 2007 and 2012 at the Portal de Miranda, a pedestrian walkway opening onto Veracruz’s main square in the very heart of the old city center.

This cultural event was initiated by Luis Figueroa, the Juventud Sonera group’s artistic director, singer and guitarist, whose original project, inspired by the release of the film Buena Vista Social Club, was to rehabilitate the tradition of son montuno which has been in existence in Veracruz since the end of the twenties.



CD ¡Guarachero! Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, IVEC, SEC, No de catálogo APCD 1381, 2004

Although it was only granted temporary authorization by the local council, it has become one of the city's cultural events, attracting an audience of regulars from working-class neighborhoods. Being located at the crossroads of tourist routes and residents' evening strolls, this scene of urban life in Veracruz is a meeting place for passers-by who are interested in what is happening, and for a circle of acquaintances composed of more or less assiduous regulars who greet the musicians on arrival, form small sociable groups, start dancing, engage in conversation, etc. For all this, the latter do not form a homogenous social group. Most are between 16 and 30 years old, but there are also older people who come alone or as couples. Some come from nearby working-class neighborhoods; others live in the poor areas of the outskirts or belong to a local cultural elite that appreciates this kind of music and urban atmosphere. Also present are Veracruz musicians who play son jarocho, son montuno, salsa and other Caribbean music, rap and reggaetón, and foreign musicians passing through Veracruz who join the group and share a moment of musical conviviality with the band's permanent members.

When the Juventud Sonera group plays, a form of expression united by the sharing of certain cultural references, the codes of which can be interpreted and given a meaning, can be observed among the Portal de Miranda regulars, although the reactions are different between the young and the not so young, the men and the women, and the dancers and the musicians. The issue is not so much to define oneself as black, but to dance certain rhythmic sequences by exaggerating body movements and choreographies relating to the Afro-Caribbean world and the transoceanic dialogue; like Afro dancing, these result from repeated exchanges between artists, intellectuals and politicians brought together by the same desire to celebrate black cultural heritage (Capone 2011).

More often than not, these performances are identified both by the public and the musicians as different from the more classic ballroom dancing styles. Progressively, a circle forms around the person who starts a performance of this type, the public shouts encouragement, the regulars exchange comments and the musicians come out of their routine and play improvisations and more vigorous solos. Some people are regular performers, like Jaina, a 20-year old woman who lives in a working-class neighborhood of Veracruz, and whose skin color and features are not particularly identified as black; she regularly launches into a performance when the musicians play Carlos Oliva's Pelotero a la Bola. At the end, one of the musicians always thanks her, gives her name to the audience and interjects a comment of the kind *"qué bárbaro como baila esa negra"*[17]. Those asked about Jaina's performance think that her style is inspired both from that of "cabaret rumberas" and from erotic dances practiced in table dancing, combining sexuality and Africanism in a stereotyped manner.

Other individuals may launch into performances, such as Doña Caro, an elderly woman of modest means who usually dances for tourists near restaurants in the old center, and sometimes goes to the Portal de Miranda to have fun at the end of the evening. In her case, both the regular onlookers and the musicians describe the way she dances as Creole. This category is used locally to designate the Caribbean's rural traditions, the origins of *son*, the combination of Spanish guitar and syncopated rhythms brought over by African slaves. So, not only does the performance of this woman arouse the admiration of this informed public, but it is also described as a living expression of Veracruz's Afro-Caribbean heritage.

Young boys and girls from the city or the region who are regulars of less conventional cultural venues, but who often attend this program, may also give themselves to this game of self-expression, combining emblematic elements of the black Caribbean (dreadlocks, beard, dress color and style) and ways of moving and dancing which are again described as forms of expression belonging to an African cultural heritage, although in a different style. Lalo explained this to me in a street conversation[18]:

"I like to come here at the end of the evening, when there is that special atmosphere, when everyone plays the game of bringing out the black [he laughs].

— Do you define yourself as Black?

— No, but we are all descendents of Blacks in some way, aren't we? So, when you hear this music and immerse yourself in this atmosphere, you inevitably start moving in a certain way ...

— What way precisely? Can you clarify?

— Not really, I can't see myself. ... But if you take the others, Ricardo for example, he feels it like the Jamaicans, you see, reggaeman, calmly [...], as for Fallo, he'll be super influenced by the rap movement, hip hop [...] and Sara, my girlfriend, she goes for this Afro dance things, it's another style." (April 2008, rough transcription).

Another element comes out of these observations: the expression of African heritage is often combined with a social boundary i.e. a person chooses to distance him/herself from the distinctive practices that demarcate the organization of nightlife in Veracruz. For example, in an informal discussion held in one of the old center's brasseries, Paco, a young artist who is a regular of Veracruz's various nightlife venues, explains this link in his own words[19]:

"I personally prefer to come here [Portal de Miranda] rather than go to the trendy discotheques on

the sea front. First, here it's live music and it's free, you're in the street ... you can move around, go for a beer, go and see what is happening elsewhere. ... Let's say that it's more in line with my *callejero* [street] frame of mind. ... That's the real Veracruz spirit... isn't it? And above all, what I can't stand trendy places, it's the super-codified way of dressing, walking, speaking ... looking at others, getting comments on your clothes, the crowd you mix with ... well, they are not all like that, you have friendlier places, more open, let's say, but usually it's like that.

— And here, how is it?

— Well, in a place like here you do what you want, you don't ask yourself whether what you do will be appreciated or not, you even almost enjoy doing the opposite, speaking badly, dressing badly, doing everything that will be judged as 'bad' by the 'good' people...

— Meaning?

— Going to street events, not being with a girl who spends her time getting ready before going out. ... When Julia [his girlfriend] dresses a bit smartly, with a dress, high heels, nail polish, I tell her watch out, you are becoming "trendy," and we laugh...

— And is there a link between listening to this kind of music and Afro-Caribbean influences rather than other influences?

— This music is a reminder of the past, with slaves, pirates, smuggling, all this nightlife of the port, dock workers, popular bars around the market ... and even though I personally also like other kinds of music and atmosphere, I like the idea of leaning towards what the 'good people' reject more than anything else." (June 2008, rough transcription).

The idea here is sharing certain cultural practices so that they can be converted into signs (Hebdige 1979; Rancière 2008). These signs, one might say, do not only reflect a popular culture, but also a way of life that is far removed from the standards set by the best society. In other words, they are signs of non-alignment with the "good people" who patronize certain trendy bars and speak with a lisp[20] in order to accentuate the social gap, or who have decided to desert the center of Veracruz to favor more intimate areas of the neighboring commune of Boca del Río, where nowadays youngsters from good families meet up with the strong urge to increase the social distance via a wider spatial gap. Finally, these signs, by containing sexually explicit body movements, mark out a common distance from those who are also called "decent" people, one of the characteristics of whom is to make the moral distance with ordinary people obvious, and to erase whatever may appear as signs of Africanism in how people show themselves to others.

Here, the display of physical features, postures, body movements and aesthetics drawing from the various cultural registers that evoke African heritage, is a method used to state one's empathy with this street culture. It re-interprets the ethno-racial boundaries in its own way and keeps an elective relationship with Africa and the black Americas alive. It is also a way of placing oneself in a class relationship, which is expressed via signs attributed locally to the various origins of mestizaje. Dancing while "bringing out the black," just like "speaking with a lisp," are social markers which are brought about by the local representation of mestizaje. This representation can be more or less accepted or denied, and the associated cultural and physical features can be more or less conspicuous or masked, blackened or whitened, and Africanized or Europeanized. It is in this sense that the expressions of such Africanism, which are observed in these contexts, do not appear *in spite of,* but *because of* the representation, which consists in permanently referring to one or the other of these various roots, and leads individuals to position themselves socially, physically and culturally vis-à-vis a so-called African heritage.

Conclusion: mestizaje and social distinction

Two concluding elements emerge from this analysis. The first refers to the issue of mestizaje as it occurs in Mexico. In this context, the question of how we understand the link between the history of slavery and the populations "of African origin" is activated or not, asserted or not, used politically or not, does not arise in the same terms, whether it is part of a militant posture of racialization aimed at

“getting out of mestizaje” like on the Pacific coast, or whether it consists in reasserting, as in the case of Veracruz, the cultural hybridization of the region’s popular music while insisting on the racialized origins of cultural expressions which are identified with mestizaje (Hoffmann and Rinaudo 2014). This is what Peter Wade perceived: “As is always the case when discussing mestizaje, music is considered as a symbol of fusion, of overcoming differences, but the representation of this symbol implies a constant reminder of the difference” (Wade 2000:66). In the Veracruz region, the “third root” national program has provided the opportunity to draw up cultural policies that focus on the integration of Veracruz within the Caribbean area while emphasizing forms of cultural expression that are largely identified with mestizaje. By doing so, it has contributed to a switch from a historical period characterized by the denial of African heritage to another, in which the African root of mestizaje has become part of the representation of society. This change does not mean that such a representation is unanimously accepted, but that from now on it imposes itself as a legitimate standard against which the local community can be defined. And for those in concrete situations, it is a matter of positioning themselves vis-à-vis this standard, which they accept or refuse, assume or put up with, and vis-à-vis the specific dimension of the representation of mestizaje—the so-called African root.

This African root leads us to consider a second concluding element, namely that the way social actors are made to position themselves vis-à-vis such an origin of mestizaje is interwoven into the logic of social distinction and counter-distinction. In Veracruz, just like in other Mexican cities, social distinction based on physical appearance, color of skin, the way one dresses and behaves, occupation, places patronized or avoided, the use of public or private transport to travel around town, is an everyday phenomenon. Therefore, one understands how, faced with injunctions to distance oneself from “ordinary people,” forms of counter-distinction may also develop according to the same dual register—social and racial. In this sense, the expressions that celebrate African cultural heritage as observed in popular music are less the product of a militant rhetoric against the backdrop of the ideology of mestizaje than of the assertion of a way of life based on another interpretation of mestizaje and its so-called “roots”—whether these are image-enhancing or belittling.

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[1] An important contribution regarding the supposed disappearance of the African-origin population was first formulated in the 1940-50s by Mexican anthropologist G. Aguirre Beltrán who defined a “black” population (Aguirre Beltrán 1972; Aguirre Beltrán 1989).

[2] The history of the population of African origin in Mexico began with the first conquistadores and continued with the introduction of the slave trade to make up for the drop in the indigenous population as a result of the conquest. The highest number of enslaved people from Africa was brought in during the first period of the colonial era, between 1580 and 1640 (Aguirre Beltrán 1972). During this period, 30,000 enslaved people arrived at the port of Veracruz alone, and 100,000 at all Mexico’s ports on the Atlantic coast (Ngou-Mve 1999).

[3] According to Brubaker’s terms, the notion of groupness refers to a happening, something that happens—or does not happen—in the social world, which crystallizes or does not succeed in crystallizing (Brubaker 2002).

[4] According to Loza, “*son jarocho* is a song and dance form originating in Veracruz, Mexico. The genre is a stylistic amalgam of influences derived from the Spanish colonizers of Mexico, from Africans taken to New Spain as enslaved people, and from the indigenous population of the southeastern region of Mexico. Initial development of the form occurred during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Loza 1992:179). Also see Pérez Fernández 2003; Sheehy 1979

[5] According to A. Hernandez, “the *fandango* is the communal-musical gathering of musicians, zapateado dancers, and sometimes poet-vocalists in *son jarocho* culture” (Hernández 2014:5). Also see García de León 2006; Pérez Montfort 1992.

[6] The chunchaca is a kind of Mexican cumbia from the state of Veracruz with presence in Tabasco, Campeche, Chiapas, Yucatán, Quintana Roo. Junior's Klan, and Los Flamers are the more famous bands following this style.

[7] *Programa Nactional de Culture 2007-2012*, Concejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, México, 2007.

[8] Veracruz Afro-Caribbean Festival 94, June 1994, *General Guide for the Event* (IVEC Archive).

[9] As explained by A. García de León, these expressions are nourished by continuous exchanges between ports and their hinterlands: “The Caribbean that I call *Afro-Andalusian* is where ‘*campesinos*, *jíbajos* and *guajiros* genres were produced, which *all* appeared in rural hinterlands of these port complexes open to international and colonial trade. Their expressions have that in common as well as numerous other characteristics: they are musical and poetic genres cultivated by farmers/cowherds and Afro-mestizo fishermen resulting from a mix of three ethnic origins:

Spanish (mainly from Andalusia), black and Indian; generally connected with rearing and who had constituted strongly mixed-race cultural niches from the 17th century: *guajiros* in Cuba, *jíbaros* in Puerto Rico and Saint-Domingue, *llaneros* in Colombia and Venezuela, *creollos* in Panama, *jarochos* in Veracruz" (García de León 1992: 28).

[10] Don Arcadio Hidalgo, a legendary musician in *son jarocho* circles, was nearly 90 years old when he joined the Mono Blanco group at the end of the seventies.

[11] Mono Blanco, *Al Primer Canto del Gallo*, Discos Pentagrama, LPP 124, 1989, Mexico.

[12] Extract from the documentary *Patricio Hidalgo y el Afrojarocho*, Producciones Sacbé, Mexico, 2012 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r70mWuOpWXU).

[13] Extract from the documentary *Patricio Hidalgo y el Afrojarocho*, Producciones Sacbé, Mexico, 2012.

[14] See also Mono Blanco's record, Matanga, *Round Whirled Records*, 2009.

[15] For a social and cultural history of salsa in the Veracruz region, see Montalvo Torres 2009.

[16] Compilations produced by the Fania Records label following the concert given in August 1971 at the Cheetah in New York, and which made salsa a commercial genre.

[17] "This black girl dances like a barbarian!", a comment recorded in June 2009.

[18] Lalo is a 23-year old man from a working-class neighbourhood of Veracruz, who plays percussion and sings with his pals on urban transport when he needs money. I met him and some of his crew when they played some of the most well known songs of son montuno and other pieces of Cuban music every night in a restaurant located just beside my house. We met regularly in the night spots of Veracruz or on the *malecon* where many street musicians and artists come together after work to have fun and play in jam sessions.

[19] Paco is a bohemian photographer, as he calls himself, and one of the key figures of the Veracruz working class portraiture. I met regularly with him and other members of the regional creative *avant-garde* in the cultural areas of the city and in the most popular *cantinas* of the port area.

[20] The expression "*hablar con la zeta"* is used to designate the Spaniards who pronounce the sounds "c" and "z" differently from the sounds "s", which is not done generally in Mexico, except to evoke one's Spanish origins with a touch of snobbery.

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