

The *Son Jarocho* as Afro-Mexican Resistance Music

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Abstract

Son jarocho is an Afro-Mexican musical tradition from southern Veracruz with prominent African diasporic elements. Its first archival documentation was via a colonial edict in 1776 banning “El chuchumbé.” The “lascivious” body movements associated with the dancing of “El chuchumbé” by communities “of broken color” was accompanied by lyrics that literally mocked colonial authorities. Similar to the dissemination of “El chuchumbé,” the *conga* rhythm and dance transferred to Veracruz by way of Cuba. The transgressive performance of this music by *mulatos* and *mestizos* in Veracruz fueled indignation by Catholic institutional forces and led to the prohibition of *sones* like “El chuchumbé” and the *conga*. This essay will explore these examples of the *son jarocho* as an African diasporic form rooted in resistance.

As Chicana and Chicano scholars looking into Black México and its cultural production, we unravel the Black musical-cultural legacy and make it explicit in our conversation of the *son jarocho*, an Afro-Diasporic music from the *sotavento* region of México. Our positionality places us in an emic-etic dichotomy as practitioners and intellectuals of the *son jarocho*. However, we share the etic perspective as outsiders from the region of origin in México. As practitioners of the *son jarocho* in the U.S., we are connected as cultivators of the music and participants of bi-national dialogue between Chicanas and Chicanos and practitioners of the *son jarocho* in México.

Responding to the mandate of this special edition on Black México for *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, our goal is to make an intervention, thinking about embodied tradition as a contemporary articulation of Afro-Mexican history. Prominent research on African-descended communities in México privilege archival research/historical/historiographical approaches. Our point of entry is the *son jarocho*, an Afro-Mexican musical tradition from the *sotavento* region encompassing the southern portion of Veracruz into Oaxaca and Tabasco. We will begin this conversation with a trajectory of the African presence in México.

A Brief History of the Enslavement of Africans in México

During the early colonial period (1521-1640), Africans and African-descended people outnumbered whites in New Spain (México). The rapid decimation of Indigenous populations due to epidemics and inhumane labor practices had created a need for an alternative labor source. From 1580- 1630 the Mexican demand for enslaved African labor was at its height and the Caribbean coastal state of Veracruz became one of the largest ports of entry for enslaved Africans in the Americas.¹ Colin Palmer writes that almost half of the enslaved sent to the New World between 1595 and 1622 went to México, citing the peak years as 1606, 1608-1610, and 1616-1621.² The burgeoning mining industry along with a growing campaign for the humane treatment of Indigenous populations spearheaded by Spanish Friar, Bartolomé de Las Casas, coincided with the peak of African enslavement in Mexico. In correspondence between the Spanish crown and colonial officials in New Spain, Viceroy Manrique de Zúñiga expressed the preference for African people over Indian labor,

[They] experience notable pressures and problems [because they] are used in the boiling house and at difficult and intolerable tasks that are more suited to negro slaves accustomed to performing such difficult jobs and [who are] not weak and frail Indians with little strength and stamina.³

Enslaved Africans suffered under the most strenuous labor conditions on plantations, sugar mills, and mines. Palmer writes, “The belief that, as workers, Africans were superior to Indians was shared by the Spaniards in New Spain and in the other colonies. The often expressed belief was that one African was the equivalent to as many as four Indians where productivity was concerned.”⁴ Despite a concentration of the enslaved in the mining regions of the northern states, Zacatecas and Guanajuato (as well as Michoacán, Tlaxcala, Jalisco) a large concentration remained in the port city of Veracruz and surrounding rural areas.⁵

Communities who escaped enslavement, or *cimarrones* in Veracruz lived in fortified settlements called *palenques*, *mocambos*, or *quilombos*.⁶ The most important commercial route from the port of Veracruz to the colonial capital of Mexico City was in the valley of Córdoba, the site of expansive sugar plantations. The most historically significant *cimarrón* settlement was founded in 1580 by Yanga, who escaped enslavement and was a royal figure from the nation of Bram in Africa.

Yanga, who had been living in the mountains for more than 30 years, “the king of the *cimarrones*,” corresponded with colonial officials on behalf of the marooned communities. Palmer writes, “In his letter to Pedro González de Herrera, Yanga made an impassioned defense of his kingdom, saying that his people had retired to an area to escape from the ‘cruelty and treachery of the Spaniards who, without any right, had become owners of their freedom.’”⁷ Yanga also led the *cimarrones* in a series of systematic attacks on travelers transporting goods along this route in the valley of Córdoba. The frequency and violent intensity of these attacks rapidly garnered attention from colonial leaders and ultimately had a crippling economic effect. In 1609 the Spanish crown sent a special army of Spaniards and Indigenous archers to “pacify” the area and to crush the actions of the fugitive enslaved. *Cimarrón* victors demanded that the Spanish crown establish a free town inhabited exclusively by the Black runaway enslaved who had escaped prior to September of 1608. In 1618 *San Lorenzo de los Negros*, the first free black town in the Americas, was established near the city of Córdoba.⁸ In 1932 the name of the town was changed to Yanga in honor of the legendary leader of *cimarrones*.⁹

The increasing racial mixture of colonial society in New Spain required a detailed classification of new hybrid and racialized subjects. The *casta* paintings of this period provided visual taxonomies of ancestral and physical characteristics maintaining a hierarchy of racial types in the Americas. While the discursive history of *casta* paintings is an extensive one, I briefly discuss them as a prominent system of archival representations of race in colonial Mexico. Bobby Vaughn writes,

The goal of these *casta* classifications that pervaded nearly all of Spanish America at least into the nineteenth century – was to create a racially hierarchical society and, to this end, the complex nomenclature differentiated people by race and ancestry.¹⁰

This system of racial classification was enforced by legal codes that inscribed restrictions and rights of these colonial subjects. The three main racial “stocks” were *Español*, *Indio*, and *Negro* and the paintings represented the variations of racial miscegenation. For example:

1. *De español y de India nace mestizo.*
2. *De español y mestiza nace castizo.*
3. *De español y castiza nace español.*
4. *De español y negra nace mulato.*
5. *De español y mulata nace morisco.*
6. *De español y morisca nace albino.*
7. *De español y albina nace torna atrás.*
8. *De español y torna atrás nace tente en el aire.*¹¹

1. From Spaniard and Indian woman bear a *mestizo*.
2. From Spaniard and *mestiza* bear a *castizo*.
3. From Spaniard and *castiza* bear a Spaniard.
4. From Spaniard and Black woman bear a mulatto.
5. From Spaniard and mulatta bear a *morisco*.
6. From Spaniard and *morisca* bear an *albino*.
7. From Spaniard and albino woman bear a *torna atrás* (literally, a “throw-back”).
8. From Spaniard and *torna atrás* bear a *tente en el aire*. (“up in the air” or “you never know what you’re going to get”).¹²

The lists continue for several pages detailing this complicated taxonomy of race. In some classifications two parents who are mixtures of “*Negro*” and “*India*” produce offspring named after an animal. For example, “*De mestizo e India nace coyote.*”¹³ (From *mestizo* and Indian woman bear a coyote).

The *casta* paintings represented these hybridized bodies in specific colonial milieus with particular attention to internal domestic spaces versus external locations. The clothing of the subjects was intricately crafted according to the racial hierarchy, as was their physical positioning within the framed image. Mexican anthropologist Sagrario Cruz-Carretero, who was instrumental in developing “The African Presence in Mexico: From Yanga to the Present” exhibition writes,

Paintings with blacks, mulattos and other mixes with blacks show violent scenes: blows are being dealt with kitchen utensils, hair is being pulled, or subjects are strewn across the floor in the drunken state to highlight the volatility and danger of the members of these groups.¹⁴

This elaborate system of representation functioned as critical to the Spanish crown informing governmental officials in Europe of the rapidly changing demography of New Spain.

In Magali Marie Carrera’s *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, she traces the genealogy of the *casta* paintings through the story of a Spanish woman whose baptismal records were incorrectly documented in the *libro de las castas* (mixed-blood caste book) versus the *libro de los españoles* (book of the Spaniards). Carrera writes, “The visual strategy of surveillance is not just about looking; rather it constructs the very object of its observation: hybrid bodies, that is, people of mixed blood.”¹⁵ These archives operated as central not only to the surveillance of these hybrid subjects of New Spain but also contributed to the archival representation of racialized bodies.

Focusing on the city of Xalapa, Patrick Carroll argues that these communities were more frequently recorded in colonial records than free laborers,

White racism and consequent attempts to discriminate against and subordinate the enslaved and free persons of African descent also heightened the likelihood of their appearance in written records, including laws as well as notarial, parish, criminal, and census records.¹⁶

These vigilantly documented records of Afro-Mexican subjects shifted after the victorious struggles for independence from Spain and the abolition of slavery.

In 1810 Father Miguel Hidalgo delivered his famous decree for Mexican independence from Spain as well as an end to slavery. Leadership of the independence movement was passed to insurgent priest, José María Morelos y Pavón, who was of African ancestry, echoed Hidalgo's abolition of slavery. In 1821, México gained its independence and, in 1829, President Vicente Guerrero, also of African descent, declared an end to slavery.

While independence established the legal termination of the Spanish *casta* systems, the legacies of this colonial racial hierarchy pervaded many aspects of Mexican society. Under this new government, all citizens regardless of skin color were theoretically considered "Mexican;" however, racist practices based on this hierarchy continued formally and informally. After the first part of the 19th century there was no governmental documentation regarding Afro-Mexican communities, thus leading to an institutional disappearance from the archive. The inception of a Mexican national identity propelled the negation of the histories of Afro-Mexicans in the national imaginary of México. Bobby Vaughn and Ben Vinson II write, "While intellectuals and political actors eventually embraced Indigenism, the topic of blackness, despite enjoying moments of vogue in political circles in the late 1870s, became viewed as antithetical to national ambitions."¹⁷ The histories of African-descended populations remained alive in embodied cultural practices, specifically regional music and dance forms from several Mexican states. Among the most prominent of these living traditions is *son jarocho* from Veracruz.

***"Para Empezar a Cantar, Permiso Pido Primero:"*¹⁸ *Son Jarocho* as African Diasporic Form**

Mexican music is not often included in prominent research about African diasporic legacies in Latin America and the Caribbean, which usually focuses on practices from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Brazil, and other South American countries such as Colombia, Venezuela, and Perú.¹⁹ For example, in his comprehensive study of diasporic music, *Black Music of Two Worlds: African, Caribbean, Latin, and African American Traditions*, John Storm Roberts asserts that México "was obviously less affected by the black experiences than many other countries."²⁰

Comprehensively speaking, *all* musical traditions developed in Latin American are syntheses of Indigenous, African and European rhythmic structures. However, the critical discussion becomes an interrogation of how social historians, ethnomusicologists and practitioners inscribe and represent these particular influences, emphasizing some and excluding others. For example, music scholars accentuate African rhythmic structures in studies of Puerto Rican *bomba* or Cuban *son montuno*; while in places like Peru or Guatemala, Indigenous musical elements are highlighted. These are generalized examples; however, we introduce them to demonstrate how specific legacies have been very simplistically assigned to geographic and national locations in the Americas. Central to this essay is the deployment of *son jarocho* in discourses of the African diaspora in musical histories of the Americas.

One of the earliest accounts of *son jarocho* is a 1779 colonial edict prohibiting a specific song, “El chuchumbé.” According to Daniel Sheehy, “[I]n 1766, a European fleet, after having stopped over in Havana long enough to take aboard passengers and seamen from Cuba’s predominately Black and *Mulato* population, arrived at the port of Veracruz, bringing with it a *son* known as chuchumbé.”²¹ The lyrics and dance movements associated with the *son* were considered vulgar by religious authorities and an edict ordering its prohibition was publicly declared.²² The suppression of “El chuchumbé” and other *sones* with similarly suggestive lyrics informed the employment of incisive double-entendres and complex metaphors that are trademarks of *son jarocho*.

According to ethnomusicologist Antonio Robles-Cahero, out of frequently danced *sones* in eighteenth and nineteenth century New Spain, only three were banned during the Holy Inquisition: “El animal” and “El chuchumbé” in 1767 and “El jarabe gatuno” in 1802.^{23,24} From approximately 1571 until the end of the Spanish colonial period in the early 1800s,²⁵ the Holy Inquisition in New Spain brutally punished anyone believed to be subversive to the Catholic Church. Intolerance of religious and ethnic diversity was extensive during the Holy Inquisition. Accused practitioners of sorcery, heresy, and blasphemy were burned to death.²⁶ Lesser crimes against the Church were punishable by strangulation.²⁷ In regard to music censorship, The Holy Inquisition attempted to silence the subversive dance, poetry, and some instrumentation of *son* during the colonial period.

Jaranero Patricio Hidalgo adds that hand drums were taken away from people of African heritage during the Holy Inquisition. Hidalgo states, “todo lo que se hacía con las manos, se lo llevaron a la tarima” (All rhythms once played by hand were transferred to the *tarima*).²⁸ In other words, rhythms once performed on hand drums were reconfigured to the lower body. The legs and feet replaced the percussive movement of the hands and the *tarima* became the source of percussion, which shaped the *zapateado* (percussive dance) of the *son jarocho* in particular, but also of México’s *son* music in general. Those who sang, played, or danced banned *sones* were punished and jailed during this time.

“El chuchumbé” is colloquially referred to as “the area four to five inches below the belly button of a male.”²⁹ “El chuchumbé,” is currently an integral and popular *son* from the *sotavento* region of the Gulf Coast, a cultural zone covering the southern portion of the Mexican state of Veracruz into Oaxaca and Tabasco where the *son jarocho* is its traditional music. However, “El chuchumbé” originated as a dance in Cuba and transported to Veracruz in the late 1700s.

According to Cuban musicologist Alejo Carpentier, “In 1776, a European fleet that had made a long stopover in Havana transported some immigrants ‘of irregular color’ to Veracruz. The newcomers brought from Cuba a dance known as *El chuchumbé*; once seen, it spread with incredible speed.”³⁰ “El chuchumbé” came from a family of rhythms and dances known as *paracumbees*, *cachumbas*, *gayumbas*, and *zarambeques*.³¹ It was a courtship dance with the male in pursuit of the female. Its choreography included coquettish moves such as the “kicking of the apron” and “lifting of skirt.”³² An informer of New Spain’s Inquisition describes “El chuchumbé”: “The verses are sung while others dance, a man with a women or four women and four men; the dance is performed with gestures, shaking, and swaying contrary to all honest intentions...because in it they embrace one another and dance belly to belly.”³³ The sexually suggestive dancing of “El chuchumbé” was a creative expression of resistance during the Holy Inquisition.

Research on “El chuchumbé” mentions minimal details about its musical properties beyond dance and vocals, especially in its early manifestation in eighteenth century Cuba and Veracruz. Absent is the description of *son jarocho* instrumentation such as the *tarima*, *jarana*, *guitarra de son*, *leona*, or *arpa*. In the eighteenth century, the music itself did not have the title “*son jarocho*,” but certainly contained the elements of *son*.³⁴ The recovery work of *son jarocho* musician Gilberto Gutiérrez sparked a new interest in the hidden history of “El chuchumbé.”³⁵

In the next section we examine a selection of *sones jarochos* with regard to their representation of racialized subjectivities, focusing on pervasive renderings of “Blackness.” While we refer to two published sources that provide extensive inscriptions of *sones jarochos*, the improvisational nature of the music creates a difficult framework to analyze lyrical content as the *versos* (verses) shift according to context and personal style of the singer.³⁶ In addition to these sources we also utilize CD liner notes, specific recordings and arrangements by groups. By analyzing the lyrics of specific renderings we can interrogate how the songs operate as historical “texts.” The fact that there are countless versions of *sones jarochos* is testament to its existence as a living and fluid form. While some of the *sones* are inscribed and/or recorded, many are not. The improvisational scaffolding of *son jarocho* as a practice together with the extensive number of *sones* and the idiosyncratic styles of the singers and poets make *son jarocho* a generative example of Diana Taylor’s theorization of the “archive” and the “repertoire.”

“El chuchumbé,” which has etymological roots in a West African word, “cumbé,” translating to the Spanish “*ombligo*” or “*barriga*” and then to the English “belly button” or “belly.”³⁷ Thus according to the 1779 colonial edict, when people danced the “El chuchumbé” their bodies were closely touching, stomach to stomach. The religious official declared,

*El baile es con ademanes, zarandeos, contrarias todos a la honestidad y mal ejemplo de los que lo ven por mezclarse en el manoseos de tramo en tramo, y abrazos y dar barriga con barriga, bien que también me informan que esto se baila en casas ordinarias de mulatos y gente de color quebrado, no de gente seria, ni entre hombres circunspectos y sí soldados, marinos y broza.*³⁸

(The dance is with the movement of hands and shaking that is contrary to all with honesty, a bad example of what you see when you mix touching, stretching arm to arm and then stomach to stomach, and I was also informed that this is danced in ordinary houses of mulattos and people of broken race, not of serious people, not of circumspect men, and yes of soldiers, marines, and people with no trade or employment.)

What is critical here is the way in which explicit corporeality is linked to racialized identities. According to the colonial archive, mulattos and/or “people of broken race” are not “serious people” and embody the vulgarity of the lyrics and the bodily movements associated with the song. Sheehy writes, “In the late eighteenth century, other sones in favor among the lower socio-economic classes were similarly condemned, even though the civil and religious authorities took objection not to *sones* themselves as to the occasional excesses of their texts.”³⁹ The implications of these “excesses” function beyond the words of the song and are imposed on the very bodies of those dancing and singing.

The proclamation of the edict functioned beyond the fear of explicit reference to the corporeal; the fact that the subjects associated with the music were racialized is foundational to its prohibition during the colonial period. Given the historical relationship between Afro-Diasporic dance during slavery and organized resistance in the Americas, the potential gathering of people of “*color quebrado*” outside of work environments threatened the social order for colonial officials. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon affirms this notion citing evidence that, “slave insurrections were either plotted at dances or scheduled to take place on occasions that involved dancing...The high pitch of emotions at these dances could serve as a pre-text for touching off a previously planned revolt.”⁴⁰ While Hazzard-Gordon focuses on the history of these practices among enslaved communities in the United States, we draw a correlation to the colonial context in Mexico.

The “lascivious” body movements associated with the dancing of the “El chuchumbé” by communities “of broken color” was accompanied by lyrics that literally mocked colonial religious authorities:

*En la esquina está parado un fraile de la merced
Con los hábitos alzados enseñando el chuchumbé*

*(A friar from La Merced is “standing” there on the corner
With his religious garb pulled up, showing the “chuchumbé”)*

*Que te vaya bien, que te vaya mal
el chuchumbé te va gustar*

*(Whether things are going well, whether things are bad,
you will like the chuchumbé)⁴¹*

The transgressive performance of this anticlerical rhetoric by *mulatos* and *mestizos* in Veracruz fueled indignation by Catholic institutional forces and led to the prohibition of *sones jarochos* like the “El chuchumbé” but the proliferation of *sones jarochos* continued under colonial rule.⁴² Returning to Hazzard-Gordon’s discussion of gatherings of music and dance and the potential for the planning of revolts by the enslaved, the dancing of the “El chuchumbé” represented not only the possibility of actual revolts by the enslaved but operated as a form of larger social revolt against fundamental colonial power structures.

The text of “El chuchumbé” is both picaresque and full of strategic resistance. This proto-*son* was banned due to its double-entendre sexual references directed at the Spanish Catholic clergy of New Spain. The verses uncover the sexual liberties of the clergy despite their mandatory vow of abstinence. “El chuchumbé” also reveals how humor through double-entendre verse makes a dangerously subversive statement, which consequently led to serious punishment.⁴³

Son jarocho musician Gilberto Gutiérrez added a I-IV-V chord progression in C major to selected verses of “El chuchumbé.” His ensemble Grupo Mono Blanco recorded “El chuchumbé” as a *son jarocho* in the 1990s. The documentation of banned verses of “El chuchumbé,” and the fact that its dance was censored in the *sotavento*,⁴⁴ serves as an early example of foundation for an emergent *son jarocho*. However, it can be generalized that people of African, indigenous, and *mestizo* (mixed) heritage, most expressed their resistance to the Church. To be specific, the *Mandiga* in Veracruz, an ethnic group originally from West Africa, wrote many *versos* against the Church.⁴⁵

Grupo Mono Blanco's reimagining of "El chuchumbé" as a *son jarocho* revived the story of resistance during the Holy Inquisition. "El chuchumbé" is now part of the standard repertoire of *sones jarochos* at *fandangos* and performances. Today, several Veracruz *son jarocho* and Chicano-Jarocho ensembles in the U.S. include their own renditions of "El chuchumbé" as a way to narrate struggle and protest. For example, on the album *It's Time* (2012), East Los Angeles group Las Cafeteras use "El chuchumbé" to denounce current anti-international migrant fervor in Arizona. In the late 1990s, the ensemble Chuchumbé also reinterpreted the hidden history of struggle during the Holy Inquisition in Veracruz and Cuba.

On *¡Caramba niño!* (1999), Chuchumbé, the *son jarocho* ensemble, retells the censorship of "El chuchumbé" during the Spanish Inquisition:

*El chuchumbé fue penado por la Santa Inquisición
Pero ellos se olvidaron que es un ritmo sabrosón*

*(The Holy Inquisition punished the chuchumbé,
But they forgot that it is a joyous rhythm)*

*El Papa llegó a la Habana pero el Diablo lo tentó
Al mirar a una cubana el chuchumbé se le alzó*

*(The Pope arrived at Havana but the Devil tempted him
Once he saw a Cuban woman, his "chuchumbé" arose)⁴⁶*

Chuchumbé's verses combine historical data with sexualized double-entendre. "Penado" has double meaning, which references both punishment (*pena*) and the phallus (*pene*). The second verse refers to a Pope's sexual desires in Havana, Cuba, perhaps invented or historical. Nonetheless, the narrative reconnects "El chuchumbé" to its Cuban origins through the sounds of the *son jarocho* in Veracruz. In comparison to the strategic resistance found in "El chuchumbé," because overt protest had severe consequences during the Holy Inquisition, only a few examples of explicit protest survive, for example, the legacy of the *conga* in Veracruz.

The Conga's Legacy of Struggle and Protest in Veracruz

The *conga* is a standard rhythm of *comparsas* (street bands) during *Carnaval* in Santiago de Cuba. *Carnaval* emerged in the nineteenth century as a festival for enslaved Africans, who were given liberty for one day during *Día de los Reyes* (Three Kings Day) or Epiphany on January 6, which was approved by the Church.⁴⁷ *Comparsas* in the nineteenth century, into the twentieth century, were also referred to as *congas*. Instruments played by *comparsas* are often made at home or furnished from inexpensive materials, which include plank drums of different shapes and sizes, bells, frying pans, tire rims, trumpets, and the *corneta china*.⁴⁸

Indentured servants from China brought the *corneta*, a double-reed horn, to Santiago de Cuba in the late-nineteenth century.⁴⁹ The *corneta china* is a staple instrument of the *comparsa* and considered indispensable to the tradition.

Comparsas during Cuba's colonial period were often mistaken as rebellions of the enslaved headed by *Cabildos de nación*. *Cabildos* were influential groups that owned land, distributed inheritances to the enslaved, provided neighborhood police services, and promoted ethnic solidarity.⁵⁰ *Cabildos de nación* were based on African nation of origin. In the nineteenth century, *cabildos* helped organize uprisings, which led to their barring from participation at *Día de los Reyes* festivities in Havana in 1823.⁵¹ By the time the *conga* rhythm migrated to Veracruz, it travelled with a rich trajectory of social struggle and protest.

Similar to the dissemination of "El chuchumbé," the *conga* rhythm and dance transferred to Veracruz by way of Cuba. Most *congás* were performed as protest songs in the streets of Veracruz, and often amounted to demands for social justice on behalf of the lower classes. The Catholic clergy was scandalized by the sexually suggestive dances of the *conga*. Like "El chuchumbé," *congás* in Veracruz had chants that denounced the duplicitous morals of those in positions of authority. However, "La conga del viejo" ("The Old Man's Conga") was able to strategically survive the Holy Inquisition of New Spain. Due to its syncretic symbolism of renovation and good wishes for the New Year, "La conga del viejo" was tolerated and able to survive religious and political scrutiny.⁵² "La conga del viejo" also survived through its incorporation in annual festivities to welcome the New Year in Veracruz's *sotavento* region.

"La conga del viejo" is a musical and cultural ritual performed in the days surrounding New Year's Eve in southern Veracruz. Diverse ensembles of the *son jarocho*, *cumbia*, Brazilian inspired *batucada*, Afro-Cuban percussion, and bricolage troupes using household appliances as instruments participate by taking to the streets in this annual ritual. Loud brass instruments also accompany this musical uproar during this New Year festivity. Ethnomusicologist Antonio Robles-Cahero provides a good metaphor for rituals of overpowering sound as "la guerra de los sonidos,"⁵³ a war of sounds, which is a reinterpretation of Antonio Gramsci's concept of "wars of maneuver,"⁵⁴ a counter-hegemonic method that involves physically overwhelming the coercive system of the State.⁵⁵ The sonic power of loud music performed by people with social grievances is a command for basic human rights. The diverse representation of ensembles that parade the streets of Veracruz is a *guerra de los sonidos*, and constitutes a creative demand of recognition from a historically aggrieved community.⁵⁶

"La conga del viejo" is performed as a communal ritual in neighborhoods of the working poor. The chorus "una limosna para este pobre viejo" (an alm for the poor old man),⁵⁷ includes a line asking for monetary donations during the procession. As the chorus suggests, the costumed portion of the ritual includes predominantly male participation.

However, the issue of gender representation becomes complex with the costumed depiction of *la viuda*, a widowed woman portrayed by a cross-dressed male. *El viejo* (the old man) is performed in a joyful and raucous manner in order to excite participants. One final installment of the family trilogy includes a man dressed as a baby, who represents the New Year.

At midnight, a *viejo* (old man) doll made of cloth—or other materials—is burnt to symbolically let go of the past and enter the New Year. The burning of objects is also a visual metaphor for purification. After being passed around the neighborhood gathering, the *viejo* doll is either seated or hung and burnt as part of the ceremony. Every neighborhood street or block claims its own doll, for example, “el viejo de Zapata,” or the “old man of Zapata Street.”⁵⁸ The burning of *el viejo* in the New Year extends itself to parts of Latin America and Spain. However, “La conga del viejo,” has another hypothesis in regard to its origin and practice; one rooted in a hidden history of resistance.

A hidden history of “La conga del viejo” dates back to shipyard worker social unrest at the *astilleros* (shipyards) of Veracruz around 1920.⁵⁹ According to Francisco Rivera Ávila, shipyard workers collectively wrote “La conga del viejo” as an act of protest at the Port of Veracruz.⁶⁰ Workers marched to the shipyards around mid-December to the beat of the *conga*. The shipyard workers, as organic bricoleurs, took pots, pans, crates, and old instruments, creating an impromptu ensemble of protest music.⁶¹ Hatton states, “the bricoleur’s response to the task at hand is limited to a rearrangement, understood as including new uses, of the existing set of means. This rearrangement involves a reorganization or improvisation with existing elements to create new structures as an ad hoc response to the environment.”⁶² Comparable to the bricolage assembly of *comparsa* instrumentation in Cuba, the shipyard worker’s use of household items provides an example of the improvised gathering of materials due to urgency of the situation; the struggle for better living and working conditions.

Shipyard workers disputed their social situation by improvising verses and singing choruses such as “una limosna para este pobre viejo que ha dejado hijos para el año nuevo” (an alm for the poor old man who had to leave his children for the New Year).⁶³ The chorus became a powerful statement of the will to struggle for social change. In accord with the current hypothesis, the hidden history of resistance of “La conga del viejo” was obfuscated within present New Year festivities in Veracruz. For many years it became known as a song performed once a year to celebrate renewal and the New Year. As previously noted, “La conga del viejo” is rooted in a moment of shipyard worker protests during the Christmas holidays into the New Year.

The Creative Renewal of Afro-Diasporic *Son Jarocho* in the Music of Chuchumbé

As a professional ensemble that emerged during the second wave of the *jaranero* movement, Chuchumbé found new ways to understand the *son jarocho* as a musical-cultural genre in Veracruz, México. In the 1990s, Chuchumbé placed Black cultural legacy, the third root of the *son jarocho*, at the forefront of their sound and discourse. The sound of Chuchumbé is best described as Afro-Diasporic *son jarocho* with elements of Cuban *son*, African rooted call and response vocals over percussion, and recovery work of the *conga* in Veracruz. This segment will analyze the creative renewal of Afro-Diasporic cultural legacy in the music of Chuchumbé.

The ensemble Chuchumbé considered the *conga* integral to the musical heritage of the *sotavento* region. The *conga* survived in Veracruz with a limited repertoire, however, the work of Chuchumbé and Patricio Hidalgo spearhead the creation of new compositions bearing the rhythm. According to Hidalgo, since the 1970s, “La conga del viejo” lost its poetic sense and *conga* rhythm.⁶⁴ In the 1990s, Hidalgo’s former group Chuchumbé reimagined “La conga del viejo” by writing new verses and applied the *conga* rhythm to standard *son jarocho* instrumentation such as the *jarana*, *guitarra de son*, *pandero*, *quijada*, and *marimból*. On their album *¡Caramba niño!* “Conga de San Benito,” claims “Santo San Benito, patrón de los Negros,” (Saintly St. Benito, patrón Saint of Black people), and is call for divine protection of the Black population.⁶⁵

“La morena” and “Los negritos”: Two Case Studies

While “El chuchumbé” functions as a point of departure in thinking about how the practice of *son jarocho* was explicitly racialized during the colonial period, I turn to two other *sones* to continue this interrogation. A popular song from the *son jarocho* repertoire, “La Morena” (The Dark-Skinned Woman), provides an opportunity to examine how particular gendered bodies are racially inscribed. A common verse is as follows,

Una morena me dijo/ que la llevara a Jamapa/ y yo le dije morena/ mejor te llevo a Jalapa/ allá te compro cadenas/ y tus aretes de plata. Yo enamoré a una morena que era todo mi querer/ se me sentaba en las piernas y me empezaba a morder. Todavía traigo las señas si quieren vengan a ver.

(A dark woman told me/ To take her to Jamapa/ And I told her dark woman/ Better, I will take you to Jalapa/ There I will buy you chains/ And your silver earrings. I fell in love with a dark woman/ Who was all my love/ She sat down on my legs/ And started to bite me/ I still have the marks/If you want, come and see.)⁶⁶

From the lyrics it is not clear as to whether this woman is “*negra*” or Black, but her dark skin signals that she is what the religious officials declared in the earlier edict as “*color quebrado*.” Whether the “broken-ness” of her race is constituted by “Indianness” or “Blackness” is not made apparent. In his book, *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance*, John Charles Chasteen argues that the figure of the “*Morena*” in Latin American music does not operate as an actual identity but “a lyrical motif that includes *Negra* or *Mulata* or *Morocha* or *China* or any other name amounting to Dark Woman.”⁶⁷ What is clear is that the woman in this *son* is both racialized by her referent of *morena* and represented as excessively violent and sexualized as she bites her lover. In the only critique that we have encountered in my research of how race is represented in “*La morena*,” Anita González writes,

That the woman bites the lover may mean that the “uncivilized” tendencies of the woman remain out of control or perhaps he wants to display the bite marks as a sign of his conquest. The woman is everything that the protagonist wants; yet she cannot be tamed. There is an implication here that *la morena*’s “uncivilized” qualities – her “dark” heritage – might make her more sensually attractive.⁶⁸

The overemphasized sexualizing of Black and *Mulata* bodies is prominent in many other hemispheric musical traditions. In her unprecedented analysis of gender and salsa music, Frances Aparicio situates these racialized representations of the *Mulata* in patriarchal commodities of pleasure and consumption.⁶⁹ In her discussion of one particular salsa song that highlights a *Mulata*’s hip movements Aparicio writes, “by trivializing her hips *only* as a rhythmical and musical pleasurable entity, then Caribbean patriarchy can erase from the body of the mulatta any traces of violence and racist practices for which it has been responsible throughout history.”⁷⁰ In Alicia Arrizón’s discussion of Spanish Caribbean cultural production, she writes, “the mulata body has often been defined and constituted as an extension of oppressive colonial practices, a perspective that helped locate the embodiment of sexuality linked to this colonial order.”⁷¹ In the *son jarocho*, depiction of the *morena* is rendered silent and her body is sexualized by the speaking protagonist.

In the opening stanza from *Son de Madera*’s 1998 recording of “*La morena*,” the singers refer to the main character of the song as “*mulata*” and not “*morena*.” The narrator alters the signifier to tell the story of his relationship with a woman who is defined as having explicit African heritage as opposed to a “dark-skinned woman” who may be of Indigenous and/or African descent. In the opening *verso* Ramón Gutiérrez proclaims:

*El mar se quedó a dormir en tus aretes de plata,
es que me voy a morir en brazos de una mulata.
(The sea stayed to sleep in your earrings of silver,
it’s that I am going to die in the arms of a mulatta).*⁷²

Significantly in this recording the members of Son de Madera do not include the line about “La morena” biting her lover and thus avoid the representation of this woman as excessively violent. In the same *verso* from Sheehy’s transcription above, Gutiérrez replaces “*cadena*” (chains) with “*gardenias*.” While the “*cadena*” that the narrator will buy for “La morena” in Jalapa could refer to jewelry or adornment it is curious as to why the Spanish word for necklace, “*collar*,” is not used in this version. This operates as an explicit reference to “chains” with the history of enslaved Africans in the Americas. González shares this interpretation that these “*cadena*” could, “imply the institution of marriage or they might allude to the chains that once held the black woman’s ancestors in bondage” and proceeds one step further to identify the woman as “black” and not merely “dark-skinned” as the first transcription of the song implies.⁷³ Son de Madera’s version offers a revision to this reference; however, many times in *son jarocho* some words are replaced with others based on parallel cadence, rhyming function and/or style of the singer.

While the female figure of “La morena” is “dark-skinned” and may not be explicitly “*negra*,” the *son* “Los negritos” offers us another text by which to examine representations of race in the *son jarocho* repertoire. Sheehy offers the following transcription:

(Verso) La mañana de San Juan/ que hace el agua gorgoritas/ cuando se van a bailar/ salen los cinco negritos.

(Estribillo) Y Jesús y María/ que me espanta/ como hacen los negros/ pa’ trabajar/ comiendo tortillas/ con carne asá/ ja ja ja ja/ ja ja ja ja.

((Verse) The morning of Saint John’s day/ When the water bubbles/ When they go out to dance/ the five Blacks come out.

(Refrain) And Jesus and Mary/ How it frightens me/ How the Blacks/ Work/ Eating tortillas/ With fried meat/ Ha ha ha ha/ Ha ha ha ha.)⁷⁴

In this song the “*negritos*” are characterized as figures that evoke simultaneous horror and amusement. In his extensive transcriptions of *sones jarochos* Aguirre Tinoco cites another *son*, “Son de los negros”:

El negro ha de ser bembón/ y de la nalga boleada/ y sin esa condición/ el negro no vale nada.

The black man has to be *bembón* (big-lipped)/ and his rear is rounded/ and without that condition/ the black man is worth nothing.⁷⁵

As previously mentioned, the historically improvisational nature coupled with the lack of specific authors or dates in inscribed versions present profound analytic difficulties. Despite these limitations, the fact that such a derogatory inscription is published as recently as 1991 demonstrates the survival of such lyrics in the circulating archive. However in a contemporary recording of “Los negritos” by Los Utrera from El Hato, Veracruz and one of the most highly regarded *son jarocho* groups, another *verso* is sung,

*Si por negro me desprecian/ porque negro es mi color,
entre los blancos y los negros/ lo negro siempre es mejor.*
(For being black they diminish/ because black is my color,
between white and blacks/ the black is always better.)⁷⁶

This version of “Los negritos” revises previous offensive representations of “blackness” by earlier inscribed versions. The fact that Sheehy’s transcriptions are recorded from older musicians in the late 1970s is significant given Los Utreras’ revision. These lyrical reformulations may reveal pivotal generational differences among musical practitioners. Some younger *son jarocho* groups, like Los Cojolites from Jaltipan, Veracruz, proudly proclaim the Afro-Mexican histories of both the music they play and in their personal ancestries. While the songs we examined operate as merely two in the voluminous repertoire of *son jarocho*, the verses of “La morena” and “Los negritos” function as critical case studies of representations of racialized bodies in this tradition.

References & Notes

¹ Regarding the shipping records of the *Casa de Contratación* in Sevilla between 1595-1622, Palmer writes, "It shows that of the estimated 104,205 slaves who sailed for the Indies, 50,525 or 48.48 percent, went to Mexico." Colin Palmer, *Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1976), 14.

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³ Palmer (1976), 70. Vaughn cites laws that prohibited indígenas from working in *ingenios* (sugar cane mills) in 1551, 1596, and 1599. Vaughn (2001), 16.

⁴ Palmer (1976), 69.

⁵ However by 1570, according to Vaughn, population data showed that the majority of the black population lived in the metropolis of Mexico City. Vaughn (2001), 14.

⁶ In Brazil *mocambo* and *quilombo* were also used to refer to an encampment of runaway slaves.

⁷ Palmer (1976), 128-9.

⁸ Sagrario Cruz Carretero writes that San Lorenzo de los Negros was established in 1630. "The African Presence in Mexico," in *The African Presence in Mexico: From Yanga to the Present*, Exhibition Catalogue, (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 2006), 28.

⁹ Today there stands a famous statue of Yanga at the edge of this small town in Veracruz.

¹⁰ Vaughn (2001), 35.

¹¹ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, "Colección Larrauri Montañó," in *La Población Negra en México, La Población negra de México* (Original publication in 1946. Mexico D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), 176. In these inscribed taxonomies the racialized body is feminine and the Spaniard remains male.

¹² My translation.

¹³ Aguirre Beltrán (1972), 176.

¹⁴ Carretero (2006), 24.

¹⁵ Magali Marie Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), xvii.

¹⁶ Carroll (2001), xv.

¹⁷ Bobby Vaughn and Ben Vinson III, “Unfinished Migrations: From the Mexican South to the American South – Impressions on Afro-Mexican Migration to North Carolina,” in *Beyond Slavery: The Multilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 225.

¹⁸ “To begin singing, I first ask permission.” This is a common phrase at the beginning of *son jarocho* songs.

¹⁹ See Peter Manuel’s *Caribbean Currents: From Rumba to Reggae*; John Storm Roberts’ *Black Music of Two Worlds: African, Caribbean, Latin, and African American Traditions* and *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States*. For example in these sources when the “son” is introduced it is strictly identified as a Cuban music and dance.

²⁰ John Storm Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds: African, Caribbean, Latin, and African-American Traditions* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 42.

²¹ Daniel Edward Sheehy, “The Son jarocho: The History, Style, and Repertory of a Changing Mexican Musical Tradition” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1979), 23.

²² *Sabed que por Denuncias que nos haverse/ Dibulgado, y extendido assi en esta Ciudad/ como en otras varias, y Pueblo de este Reyno/ ciertas Compas que llaman el Chuchumbé—Que/ empiezan en la Esquina está parado las cuales/ son en sumo grado Escandalosas & obcenas, y/ ofensibas de Castos Oydos, y se an cantado, y/Cantan acompañandolas con Baile no menos/ Escandaloso, y obceno acompañado con acciones/Demonstracciones y meneos desonestos, y/ Probocativos de Lascibia, todo ello en grabe/ Ruina, y Escándalo a las Almas de Pueblo/ Cristiano, y en perjuicio delas conciencias,/ y reglas ..., y ofensa de la edificación y/buenas costrumbas, y en contrabendicion delos/ mandatos de Santo Oficio... Zacatlán Julio 8 1779.*”(Ramo de Inquisición 1779: Tomo 1297, foja 19-20).

(Let it be known that through denunciations made/we know that to us, and extended/throughout the city and various other cities/and towns of this kingdom are certain couplets are sung/that they call the Chuchumbé – beginning/“On the corner is standing” which are to a great degree scandalous and obscene, accompanied/by dishonest demonstrative actions and/writhings provocative of lasciviousness,/all tending to the ruin scandal/of Christian souls, and in/injury to the consciences and rules...., and/offensive to edification and good customs,/and opposed to the orders of the/Holy Office...Zacatlán July 8, 1779). Both the Spanish version and its English translation are in Sheehy (1979), 24.

²³ José Antonio Robles-Cahero, “Cantar, bailar y tañer: Nuevas aproximaciones a la música y el baile populares de la Nueva España,” *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* 8 (2005): 63.

²⁴ According to the Cultural Institute of Veracruz (IVEC) *son jarocho* research website, a larger group of *sones* and dances banned between 1571-1820: “El catatumba,” “El currimpamplí,” “El fandango,” “El pan de jarave,” “El pan de manteca,” “El mambrú,” “El saranguandingo,” “El temor,” “El toro,” “El toro nuevo,” “El torito,” “El zacamandú,” “La cosecha,” “La maturranga,” “Las boleras,” “Las lloviznitas,” “Las pateritas,” “Las seguidillas,” “Las teranas,” “Los chimisclanes,” “Los garbanzos,” “Los merolicos,” “Los panaderos,” and “Los perejiles.” <<http://www.musiquesdumonde.net/La-Inquisicion-en-la-musica.html>>> Accessed on October 8, 2012.

²⁵ Leslie Katz, “Rare Documents Shed Light on Grisly Mexican Inquisition,” *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California* 29 (1996): 1-5.

²⁶ Arthur Howard Knoll, “The Inquisition in Mexico,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 16, no. 95 (1890): 483.

²⁷ Knoll, “The Inquisition in Mexico,” 483.

²⁸ Patricio Hidalgo, personal communication with the author, August 17, 2012. My translation.

²⁹ Marco Amador, personal communication with the author, August 2009.

³⁰ Alejo Carpentier and Alan West-Durán, “Music in Cuba,” *Transition* 81/82 (2000): 191.

³¹ Ibid., 193

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Daniel Sheehy, personal communication with the author, October 1, 2012.

³⁵ The 2006 documentary “Fandango: Buscando al Mono Blanco” directed by Ricardo Braojos and written by Braojos along with Eugene Rodríguez traces Gutiérrez’s work in cultivating a revival of the *son jarocho*.

³⁶ Daniel Sheehy’s 1979 dissertation, “The Son Jarocho:” The History, Style, and Repertory of a Changing Mexican Musical Tradition” and Humberto Aguirre Tinoco’s 1991 *Sones de la tierra y cantares jarochos* have been the most valuable resources with detailed transcriptions of *sones jarochos*.

³⁷ Roberts cites a dance named “*cumbé*” from Equatorial Guinea. Roberts (1998), 87.

³⁸ *Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo Inquisición* as cited in Arquitecto Humberto Aguirre Tinoco (México D.F.: Programa de Desarrollo Cultural del Sotavento, 1991), 16. My translation.

³⁹ Sheehy (1979), 17.

⁴⁰ Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 18.

⁴¹ Grupo Mono Blanco, “El chuchumbé,” *Fandango* (Urtext 2004). My translation.

⁴² As an inversion, Sheehy cites a son that argues for the enjoyment of the *son* by religious figures in “*La Chacona*:”

“*No hay fraile tan recoxido/ Ni monja tan Relixiosa/ Wue en eoyendo aquaeste son/ No dejen sus santas horas./ Bailaron todo quel día/ Sin aver comido cosa/ Y si el son no les quitaran/ Bailando fueran ahora.*”

(There is no friar so withdrawn/ Nor nun so religious/ That in hearing that son/ Would not leave their holy hours. They danced all that day/ Without having eaten a thing/ And if they had not taken away the son/ They would be dancing right now.) Brizeño 1972. Original edition, Pedro Ballard, 1626, as cited in Sheehy (1979), 20.

⁴³ Patricio Hidalgo, personal communication with the author, August 17, 2012.

⁴⁴ The cultural zone of the *son jarocho*.

⁴⁵ Patricio Hidalgo, personal communication with the author, August 17, 2012.

⁴⁶ Chuchumbé, “Pascuas, justicias, y fuga,” *¡Caramba niño!* (Producciones Alebrije 1999). My translation.

⁴⁷ Bettelheim, Judith, “Negotiations of Power in Carnival Culture in Santiago de Cuba,” *African Arts* 24, no. 2 (1991): 67; Schloss, Andrew, Liner notes to *Carnaval in Cuba*, (Folkways FW 04065).

⁴⁸ Robin D. Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1997), 64.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 252

⁵⁰ Bettelheim, “Power in Carnival Culture,” 67-68.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 69

⁵² Paraphrasing “De nuevo el viejo” << <http://www.musiquesdumonde.net/De-nuevo-El-Viejo.html>>>.

⁵³ Robles-Cahero, “Cantar, bailar y tañer,” 65.

⁵⁴ Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections From The Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

⁵⁵ Paraphrasing E. Colin Ruggero’s “Gramsci: A War of Position,” http://www.warofposition.com/?page_id=94.

⁵⁶ “Aggrieved communities” is a concept introduced by George Lipsitz, “Chicano Rock: Cruising Around the Historical Bloc,” *Rockin’ the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*, edited by Reebee Garofalo (Boston: South End Press, 267-279).

⁵⁷ Our translation

⁵⁸ César Castro, personal communication with the author, October 25, 2012. *La calle Zapata* is a local street in La Huaca, a neighborhood in the city of Veracruz.

⁵⁹ Patricio Hidalgo, e-mail message to the author, November 15, 2012.

⁶⁰ Citing the documentary *Patricio Hidalgo y el Afrojarocho* (2012).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Elizabeth Hatton, "Levi Strauss's 'Bricolage' and Theorizing Teachers' Work," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1989): 76.

⁶³ Citing the documentary *Patricio Hidalgo y el Afrojarocho* (2012). My translation.

⁶⁴ Paraphrased from the documentary *Patricio Hidalgo y el Afrojarocho*.

⁶⁵ Chuchumbé, "Conga de San Benito," *¡Caramba niño!*, my translation and interpretation.

⁶⁶ Sheehy (1979), 356. Xalapa, Veracruz is also spelled as Jalapa.

⁶⁷ John Charles Chasteen, *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Dance* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 201.

⁶⁸ Anita González, *Jarocho's Soul: Cultural Identity and Afro-Mexican Dance* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 2004), 62.

⁶⁹ The Spanish spelling of mulatta is *mulata*.

⁷⁰ Frances Aparicio, *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Culture* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 145.

⁷¹ Arrizon, (2006), 101.

⁷² Son de Madera, *Son de Madera*, Urtext, 1998.

⁷³ González (2004), 62.

⁷⁴ Sheehy (1979), 356-57.

⁷⁵ Tinoco (1991), 84.

⁷⁶ “*Los Negritos*,” Los Utrera, *El Son Jarocho*, Urtex, 1996. My transcription and translation.

Son mexicano (pronounced Sone in English) is a category of Mexican folk music and dance that encompasses various regional genres, all of which are called son. The term son literally means "sound" in Spanish, and is also applied to other unrelated genres, most notably Son cubano. Mexican son likely originated in Veracruz with major son traditions in this state along with the La Huasteca region, the Pacific coast of Guerrero and Oaxaca, Michoacán and Jalisco (where it morphed into mariachi). The music