

Transnational Trajectories of Colombian Cumbia

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Abstract: *During 19th and 20th century Latin America, mestizaje, or cultural mixing, prevailed as the source of national identity. Through language, dance, and music, indigenous populations and ethnic groups distinguished themselves from European colonizers. Colombian cumbia, a Latin American folk genre of music and dance, was one such form of cultural expression. Finding its roots in Afro-descendant communities in the 19th century, cumbia's use of indigenous instruments and catchy rhythm set it apart from other genres. Each village added their own spin to the genre, leaving a wake of individualized ballads, untouched by the music industry. However, cumbia's influence isn't isolated to South America. It eventually sauntered into Mexico, crossed the Rio Grande, and soon became a staple in dance halls across the United States. Today, mobile cumbia DJ's, known as sonideros, broadcast over the internet and radio. By playing cumbia from across the region and sending well-wishes into the microphone, sonideros act as bridges between immigrants and their native communities. Colombian cumbia thus connected and defined a diverse array of national identities as it traveled across the Western hemisphere.*

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What interests me as a Latin Americanist are the grassroots modes of expression in marginalized communities that have been simultaneously disdained and embraced by dominant sectors in their quest for a unique national identity. In Latin America, this tension has played out time and again throughout history, beginning with the newly independent republics in the 19th century that sought to carve a national identity for themselves that would set them apart – though not too far apart – from the European colonizers. In the early 20th century, in much of Latin America the process known as *mestizaje*, or racial and cultural mixing, underpinned official renditions of national identity. Whether it was the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre's contention that Brazil was a racial democracy, the Mexican educator José Vasconcelo's conceptualization of mestizos as *la raza cósmica* (the cosmic race), or the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's theory of transculturation, the undercurrent of these narratives of nationhood was the glorification of a *mestizaje* that asserted that Indigenous, European, and African heritages comingled harmoniously not only within society, but also within the individual citizens of that society, creating cultures uniquely particular to the region.

This version of the mixing process held sway in the national imaginations of much of Latin America for the better part of the twentieth century, though cracks emerged periodically through grassroots acts of resistance. With the approach of the 1992 quincentennial of Columbus' arrival to the Americas, narratives enshrining racial harmony were openly and actively challenged. The violence lurking below the processes of biological and cultural mixing was exposed, as was the fallacy that *mestizaje* breeds equity. The echo of its thinly veiled message reverberated in the commonly heard adage *Para mejorar la raza*, “in order to improve the race,” to invoke the reality that mixtures embodying more whiteness were considered

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superior to those with less. Furthermore, scholars and activists noted that holding up the *mestizo* as the model citizen effectively relegated Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and other ethnic communities to the sidelines, rendering them invisible in the national imagination. This critical stance of racial and cultural mixing informs my study of the potential for popular music to act as a vehicle of resistance or collaboration for those marginalized from power in Latin America. Several scholars, including Néstor García Canclini, Peter Wade, and Michael Quintero Birenbaum offer theoretical frameworks for exploring the role of cultural production in reinforcing or upending romanticized versions of mixing. But the researcher who has been most influential in guiding my own approach is Deborah Pacini Hernández, who unravels the use of *mestizaje* as a political strategy without ignoring its positive presence in the lived practice of Latin Americans and Latinos/Latinas in the US.

With this approach in mind, let's begin with the origins of cumbia on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. Though the genre probably emerged in Afrodescendant communities during the colonial period before 1810, the use of the term "cumbia" can only be traced back as far as the late 19th century.¹ The music relied heavily on African drums as well as an indigenous wind instrument known as a *gaita* and the maracas, another indigenous instrument that lends cumbia its distinctive and contagious "chu chucu chu" rhythm. The dance that accompanies the music is the reenactment of a courtship dance, with the man circling the woman who plays hard to get. Early references to the dance indicate that it not only expressed the courtship between individuals but also the reenactment of *mestizaje*, as the dance was traditionally construed as the representation of a black man seeking sexual union with an indigenous woman. What is interesting about this manifestation of *mestizaje* is that it left out the European element and, for that reason, was deeply troubling to the authorities. Peter Wade comments: "The historiography of cumbia, debating the relative weight of Amerindian, African, and European heritage, sees its own reflection in the dance itself, as a dramatic replaying of an original – and in this case subversive – act of mixture."² Cumbia's so-called "scandalous" origin will later be obliterated from national narratives as more affluent actors usurp the genre.

Through the first half of the 20th century, cumbia remained a staple of coastal Colombian culture. Influenced by the big band craze of the 1930s and 40s in the US, bands experimented with the genre by eliminating the traditional wind instruments to foreground the clarinet. This variety of cumbia was perceived as more modern sounding and was a hit with coastal elites. With the advent of new recording technologies and the growth of urban elites in the cosmopolitan centers of Bogotá and Medellín, cumbia began its initial foray into the country's interior in the 1940s. The Caribbean coast of the country had long been considered an isolated backwater of primitive and inferior culture, in spite of its extensive contact with Caribbean nations to the north. The polyrhythmic cumbia in its original form did not meet the "refined" standards of the middle and upper classes in the interior. Record companies in Medellín, seeking to render the genre commercially viable, employed mostly mestizo performers who further "whitened" the cumbia, most notably by downplaying the role of percussion and regularizing the rhythm so it was easier to dance to. The resulting "cumbia orquesta," was barely recognizable to the costeños, who turned their attention, instead, to developing other coastal genres such as

¹ Peter Wade, *Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 30.

² Wade, *Music, Race, and Nation*, 61.

vallenato. Nonetheless, the cumbias recorded in the interior were exported both north and south where they were marketed as “música tropical,” tropical music.

As big band cumbia migrated south through Ecuador, Perú to Chile, it also traversed the continent through Bolivia to Buenos Aires, morphing along the way as it became imbued with new layers of identity politics. On its voyage north, the cumbia gained little of a foothold in the Caribbean but became a smashing success in Mexico, the borderlands, and later in El Salvador. We are going to make a few stops along these musical trajectories for a taste of several, but not nearly all, cumbia variants as well as a snapshot of the audiences who took to the genre and made it their own.

In Peru, cumbia took hold throughout the country in the 1960s. Like Colombia, Perú was stratified by region as the capital of Lima, located on the coast, was considered the cosmopolitan hub while the Andean and Amazonian regions were considered backward hinterlands. However, in contrast to Colombia, urban elites in Peru did not embrace mestizaje as the basis of national identity. The minority population of *criollos*, as the inhabitants of European descent were known, begrudgingly tolerated the *mestizo* and indigenous Andean majority in the hopes of one day seeing them assimilate into modern society.³ During the 1970s and 1980s, in many parts of Latin America, large cities swelled with a phenomenal influx of migrants from the countryside in search of economic opportunity and a glimpse of the promise held out by modernity. In Lima, the population of merely 150,000 in 1940 reached a staggering four and a half million in 1981.⁴ Thousands of indigenous migrants hailing from the highlands squatted around the city’s perimeter in slums that came to be known as *pueblos jóvenes*, or young villages. These newcomers brought *cumbia andina* with them, a fusion of cumbia with the strong musical tradition known as the *huayno*, comprised of musical compositions played on indigenous flutes and drums as well as the Andean adaptation of the Spanish guitar, known as the charango, made from an armadillo shell. The voices accompanying this music would sing in plaintive tones about loss, longing, and the beauty of the mountains. Contrary to *criollo* expectations, migrants did not abandon their music and other cultural artifacts when settling in the capital, as Joshua Tucker observes:

“Violating the tenets of *criollo* teleology, according to which a Westernized minority would inevitably overcome and absorb a lamentable Andean majority, migrants did not usually seek to blend seamlessly into the social order that they found in Lima. Instead, . . . they recreated Andean social patterns and cultural practices within the capital, inundating the city with *huayno* music, patron saint fiestas, radio programs, and Andean cuisine.”⁵

In the *pueblos jóvenes*, Andean musical fusions incorporated the *cumbia costeña* to engender something known as *chicha*, a homegrown variety of cumbia that at once expressed the migrant connection to the mountain homeland and the desire to integrate into the modernity of the urban space and thereby reap its benefits. *Chicha* melded the melancholic lyric sensibilities of *huayno*

³ Joshua Tucker, *From The World of the Poor to the Beaches of Eisha: Chicha, Cumbia, and the search for a Popular Subject in Peru* in *Cumbia! Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Musical Genre*, eds. Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Pablo Vila (Duke University Press, 2013), 144.

⁴ Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste, *All Cumbias, The Cumbia. The Latin Americanization of a Tropical Genre*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 32.

⁵ Tucker, “From The World of the Poor to the Beaches of Eisha,” 144.

to the upbeat cumbia rhythm, with an overlay of tinny, electric guitar and keyboard that have led some to refer to the genre as “psychedelic cumbia.” Though it was wildly popular, the music was considered distasteful by urban elites as it confronted official notions of national identity with the reverberations of a decidedly electric yet indigenous soundscape that could not be easily ignored. Los Shapis were perhaps the most commercially successful of the *chicha* groups, and even made a film in 1985 that exemplifies the distance that the cumbia had travelled from its origins in the Colombian coastal region.

From the Andes, the cumbia winded its way to Buenos Aires, the cosmopolitan capital of Argentina. Unlike much of Latin America, Argentinian elites gazed outward toward Europe for a sense of national identity and distanced themselves from the notion of a *mestizo* nation. In fact, in the 19th century, the nation building project in Argentina explicitly espoused a European identity with military campaigns into the interior to exterminate indigenous populations and immigration policies that actively promoted an influx of Europeans to provide the labor force needed for the rapidly developing agricultural and meat processing plants. By the end of the twentieth century, however, *mestizo* and indigenous migrants from the Andean highlands as far away as Ecuador began to flood Buenos Aires in search of jobs and opportunity, many of them settling in the *villas miseria*, the slums ringing the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.

The Andean migrants transported the rhythms of *chicha*, which melded with Argentinian versions of cumbia and together incubated in the margins of this city modeled on Paris. By the end of the 1990s, *cumbia villera*, or slum cumbia, emerged much to the chagrin of the middle and upper classes. It was coarse, off-key, distasteful, lewd and hugely appealing to an underclass of urban youth struggling to get ahead in the face of high unemployment rates. The instrument of choice for the slum dwellers who created and performed this cumbia variant was the keytar, a relatively cheap and portable alternative to the clarinet or electric guitar as the lead melody maker. *Damas Gratis* was perhaps the most visible of the *cumbia villera* groups as its leader, Pablo Lescano, gained notoriety through scandalous performances and irreverent interviews. He was featured on the cover of popular magazines as a trend setter.

The mainstream reaction to this incarnation of *cumbia* was not unlike the reaction met by gangsta rap in the US. Dominant sectors condemned *cumbia villera* as a “social illness” and insisted on censoring the genre, which it equated with juvenile delinquency, and the government complied. Still, in the aftermath of the 2002 economic collapse when the number of people living in extreme poverty peaked at 60%, middle class youth were drawn to the music as an avenue of expression for their sudden lack of economic security. *Cumbia villera*, with its cohort of *mestizo*, migrant, and middle class youth, challenged the national narrative of an Argentina that mirrored the progress and development of its European models.

Let us now turn to cumbia’s northward migration where big band cumbia landed with a splash in Mexico in the 1940s. In the twentieth century, the official narrative of *mexicanidad*, or Mexican-ness, embraced the *mestizo* identity of the country in the wake of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. While the urban elites in the capital were the first to take to the genre, soon the cumbia made its way north to infiltrate the accordion infused *norteña* music that was a mainstay of the soundscape of the borderlands. The accordion arrived to the border region with German immigrants in the 1840s when the US southwest was still part of Mexico. It became a staple of popular musical expression in genres such as the *corrido* and *norteña* music, often thought of as Mexican polka. Soon working classes, especially in the industrial center of

Monterrey in northern Mexico, began grinding out “chu chucu chu” rhythms on the accordion at get-togethers and local celebrations.

The genre permeated the borderlands on both sides of the Río Bravo, otherwise known as the Río Grande, as *Tejanos*, Texans of Mexican descent, incorporated it into their repertoire of dance music. Selena Quintanilla’s claim to fame as one of the first women to crack the male dominance of the Tejano music industry was tied directly to her string of cumbia hits. Her popularity congealed the genre as a marker of *mexicanidad* in the literal and figurative borderlands that stretched from southern Mexico, to the US Southwest, Northwest, Midwest, Southern, and Eastern seaboard through migration corridors both old and new.

While Mexican cumbia was popularized among long-standing working-class communities on both sides of the border, since the 1990s Mexican immigrants to the US have given it a new twist. Migrations northward surged following the enactment of NAFTA in 1994. Mexican farmers who could not compete with the cheap agricultural products being imported from the US left the country in droves searching for economic opportunity. Between 1990-2000, the Mexican-born population in the US spiked by almost 53%, increasing from 13.5 million to 20.6 million.⁶ With the wave of immigration sparked by NAFTA, the association of cumbia with *mexicanidad* took on a new dimension. *Sonideros*, DJs with mobile sound systems, first emerged in the 1970s in Mexico City where they made entertainment accessible to the urban poor. They later spread into central Mexico and by the 1990s, the *sonidero* and the cumbia were woven into the cultural security blanket of thousands of Mexicans displaced by NAFTA. Unlike the many Mexicans and Mexican Americans in communities throughout the US that can trace their history in this country back a century or more, the more recent newcomers often contend with an insecure immigration status that compromises their ability to return to their homeland, even for a visit. With the advent of new technologies and social media in the 2000s, Mexican immigrant communities have forged channels of communication and economic support with their family and friends back in Mexico with homegrown cumbias that evade the music industry all together. The *sonidero* has emerged as the star of this rendition of the cumbia as he is responsible not only for the sound system and creating a playlist that will entice participants to dance and reminisce, but also for voicing over the music with *saludos*, salutations and dedications destined for listeners on the “other side.” The musical get-togethers, often held in VFW and church halls, are filmed and posted to YouTube channels where they can be viewed from both sides of the border.

In Cathy Ragland’s study of *sonidero* dances in New York, New Jersey, and Puebla, she found that the dance attendees on both sides of the border “... enable a flow of expressive culture and capital while circumventing the mainstream political economy of music and global markets in order to allow for individual and community-based creativity in accordance with their own sensibilities, desires, and experiences.”⁷ Ragland further observes that, in addition to serving as a conduit for preserving a link to the homeland, these happenings afford the younger generations of Mexican-Americans who were born in the US the opportunity to connect with their Mexican

⁶ Deborah Pacini Hernández, *¡Oye como va! Hybridity and Identity in Latino Popular Music*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 122.

⁷ Cathy Ragland, *Communicating the Collective Imagination: The Sociospatial World of the Mexican Sonidero Cumbia in Puebla, New York, and New Jersey in Cumbia! Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Musical Genre*, eds. Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Pablo Vila (Duke University Press, 2013), 135.

roots.⁸ Mestizaje takes on a new layer for Latinos in the US who live a hyphenated identity somewhere in an undefined, in-between space of “Ni de aquí ni de allá” = “Neither from here nor there.” Ragland claims that for those who identify as Mexican but were born in the US, the *sonidero* dance is Mexico, a space where they can take pride in their multivalent heritage and move freely along the hyphen.

Sonidero inflected cumbia inspired Celso Piña, a virtuoso accordion player from Monterrey with several cumbia hits, to venture out of his comfort zone in the new millennium. He teamed up with hip-hop artists to create a fusion of sounds embedded in the *sonidero* format. Piña’s song “Cumbia del río” is a shout-out to the *sonidero* and his role in invoking the cumbia as a marker of *mexicanidad*. The song appears on his 2002 album, *Barrio Bravo*, which was nominated for a Latin Grammy in the tropical music category. Piña’s fusion appealed to both urban youth and working class *mexicanos* in the greater borderlands. The importance of the cumbia to Mexican immigrants generally cannot be overstated, as Pacini Hernández explains: “As the stream of Mexicans to the United States has intensified, cumbia’s role in Mexicans’ musical imaginary has expanded beyond being simply a common feature of their popular culture, attaining its current valence as a powerful sonic symbol of the Mexican migration experience.”⁹

The last stop on our cumbia trek is closer to home. Salvadorans in the US have also nurtured their link to the homeland through the cumbia. The genre made its journey to El Salvador in the 1940s but became especially important during the Salvadoran Civil War in the 1980s. The cumbia, with its bright rhythm and light heartedness, provided a modicum of relief to a population traumatized by violence as the US-backed military government endeavored to eliminate the guerrilla forces of the FMLN insurgency. As Salvadorans fled their war-torn country and headed north, they packed the cumbia with them and pulled it out when re-uniting with fellow Salvadorans in the US. One of their primary migration corridors was between the region of San Miguel, the center of horrific atrocities during the war, and the metropolitan Washington, DC area. As the children of these immigrants come of age, their fascination with the more trendy genres of *reggaetón* and *bachata* is tempered with the strains of the cumbia that their parents and grandparents played in their households. Reyna Zavala, LaSalvadoReina, a representative of the hyphenated Salvadoran youth who hails from Washington, DC, combines cumbia with hip hop. The music video of her song “Cumbia capital” features the singer in iconic landmarks of the nation’s capital and of the Salvadoran community inside the beltway. She explains that she was inspired to create her music because of the lack of visibility of Salvadorans in US mainstream culture.¹⁰

“Cumbia is the musical passport to Latin America,” according to the major labor producer Cameron Randle.¹¹ If we listen carefully to its rhythms and permutations, the various layers of the fascinating complexity of racial and cultural mixing that undergird national identities and that also resist them are revealed. What is more, the cumbia appeals to our humanity, to our collective need for sound to uplift us in the face of adversity.

⁸ Ragland, *Communicating the Collective Imagination*, 129.

⁹ Pacini Hernández, *¡Oye como va!*, 126.

¹⁰ Raquell Reichar “Meet LaSalvadoReina, the Salvadoran Queen of Hip Hop,” *Fierce*, December 28, 2017. <https://fierce.wearemitu.com/fierce-boss-ladies/meet-la-salvadoreina-the-salvadoran-queen-of-cumbia-hip-hop/>

¹¹ Manuel Peña, *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation*, (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1999), 127.

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