

AFRICAN DIASPORA AND COLOMBIAN POPULAR MUSIC IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY¹

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In this paper I argue that the concept of diaspora is problematic insofar as it implies a process of traffic outwards from an origin point (usually seen as geographical, cultural and/or “racial”). This origin is often seen as being a key to the definition of diaspora—without it, the concept descends into generalized incoherence (Brubaker 2005). I want to argue for the continued usefulness of a concept of diaspora, in which the “origin” is understood as a space of imagination (which is not to say that it is imaginary, although it may also be that) and in which the connections between the “outlying” points of the diaspora are as important, or more so, than the connections between the outliers and the origin.

Analytically speaking, diaspora has to be distanced from simple concerns with uni-directional outward dispersals from a single origin point (which may also carry certain masculinist connotations). Specifically, I think the concept of diaspora points at a kind of cultural continuity but one where “cultural continuity appears as the mode of cultural change” (Sahlins 1993, 19). For theorists such as Hall and Gilroy, diaspora serves as an antidote to what Gilroy calls “camp thinking” and its associated essentialism: diasporic identities are “creolized, syncretized, hybridized and chronically impure

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cultural forms" (Gilroy 2000, 129). This is an important perspective, which is both analytic and descriptive: the analytic term refers to the everyday phenomenon of identities as they exist in the world. But the emphasis on hybridization runs the risk of sidelining continuities. Hall is right to say that the rich cultural roots from Asian and African aesthetic traditions that feed UK black experience are, in a diasporic context "re-experienced through the categories of the present" (Hall 1996, 448), but this does not entirely capture the *sense* of continuity that is often accorded those roots by the people who are interpreting their own lives.

For Brubaker (2005), diaspora as "thing" does not really exist as an analytic concept; instead the analytic term should be used in adjectival form to refer to the phenomenon of the diasporic stance or attitude adopted by people who seek to maintain or create identities that refer to a homeland. This is also important because it reflects the notion of cultural continuity or sameness, which may persist alongside (or rather because of—in the sense of mutually constituting) cultural change. The point about diaspora as an analytic concept is that it reflects that continuity, both in terms of an insider perspective of people who (as one might expect) interpret cultural change in a selective and appropriative way, and in terms of grasping that continuity as something that, partly as a result of these interpretations, creates a real cultural complex of interconnections. "Tradition" is a term that Gilroy deconstructs fairly comprehensively, but, rather in passing, he gives it some residual room that I think is worth repeating here:

it may make sense to try to reserve the idea of tradition for the nameless, evasive, minimal qualities that make these diaspora conversations possible . . . as a way to speak about the apparently magical processes of connectedness that arise as much from the transformation of Africa by diaspora cultures as from the affiliation of diaspora cultures to Africa and the traces of Africa that those diaspora cultures enclose. (Gilroy 1993, 199)

I think the very concept of diaspora should refer to what Gilroy admits as "tradition" here: rather than conceiving of a tension between routes and roots, the "roots" constitute the possibility of existence of "routes."

As the history of Colombian popular music that I will present here indicates, musical processes are characterized by a series of multilateral exchanges, which are dynamic and often unpredictable. However, these exchanges are always being read and interpreted in specific ways, by different sets of audiences and commentators, who are interested in constructing certain narratives, often ones in which origins play an important role. Diaspora may then serve a function as a narrative about commonality and sameness, within diversity and difference, although it is an empirical question as to the terminology and concepts that appear in such a narrative: "diaspora"

may not appear as such. From an analytic point of view, diaspora can also serve such a function, framing an analytic concern with identifying cultural connections of a kind that are not captured by terms such as “transnationalism,” which tends to refer to processes that cross national boundaries in a continuous fashion and may create a kind of third non-nationalized space; or “globalism/ globalization,” which refers to the globalizing spread of some economic, political and cultural processes and their interaction with “local” spaces; or “Pan-Africanism,” which captures a specific kind of political project.

This paper will explore the idea of diaspora and musical exchanges in relation to changes in Colombian popular music, specifically that from the Caribbean coastal region of the country, often identified as more or less African-influenced. It will trace changes that occurred from the 1920s onwards, with the commercialization of *cumbia* and *porro* and related styles, and look also at more recent developments around *champeta*, *currulao*, and rap.

The Early Twentieth Century and *Bambuco*

In the early twentieth century, nations in Latin America were beginning a process of rapid urbanization, with extensive rural-urban migration and the differentiation of urban space into class stratified zones. These societies became increasingly capitalized: internal frontiers were pushed back in aggressive colonisations, national industries grew, and economies were linked more and more into global circuits of exchange. Cultural nationalism was widespread and expressed itself in musical nationalism. Part of this was the appropriation of “traditional” elements in art music circles (Béhague 1996), but more important was the emergence of national popular music styles: *tango* in Argentina, *samba* and *maxixe* in Brazil, *danza* in Puerto Rico, *ranchera* in Mexico, *son*, *rumba*, and *guaracha* in Cuba and so on. In many ways, these were musical styles that developed in the working class barrios of Latin American cities, often by adapting European styles and combining them with African-derived (and to a much lesser extent Amerindian) aesthetics and rhythms, and that were then fastened upon by the middle classes, “cleaned up,” modernized, and made into acceptable national symbols.² “In the typical pattern,” writes Manuel, “lower class syncretic forms gradually percolate upwards, acquiring more musical sophistication and

2. This process has been widely described for different styles. See, for example: Manuel et al. (1995) for the Caribbean in general; Pacini (1995) and Austerlitz (1995) on bachata and merengue; Savigliano (1995) on tango; Moore (1997) on son in Cuba. Pacini (1995, 232) notes that the emergence of working-class popular musics is a common phenomenon following processes of urbanization and that styles as varied as US blues and polka, Nigerian *juju*, Greek *laika* and Trinidadian calypso “have eventually percolated up into the mainstream.”

eventually come to be enjoyed by the upper classes," perhaps also gaining the status of national music (Manuel et al. 1995, 15).

This gives us a general pattern which is useful for comparative purposes, although it rather over-simplifies the processes at work. It is necessary to appreciate the very syncretic nature of the lower-class forms which fed off a host of different musical currents. This helps us to avoid falling into an oppositional model in which the musical style in question is formed entirely by subaltern classes, located "in the barrios," and then taken and modernized by the middle class. There is no simple opposition between the local and the national (nor between these and the global), nor between the traditional and the modern. Instead, the music "in the barrio" was actually created in complex processes of interchange, class mediation, and appropriation that worked in ambiguous spaces between country and city, between social classes and, not infrequently, between the national and the international.

In Colombia, the music that took pride of place from the perspective of the Andean capital, Bogotá, was the *bambuco*, a style in 3/4 or 6/8 time played by string ensembles (Varney 2001). It was said, by some, to be of mainly Spanish origin. Africa and blackness were, in one sense, denied in this type of musical nationalism, yet, in another sense, they were both absently present. I have argued elsewhere that Latin American ideologies of *mestizaje*—which link nation-building and the formation of national identity to processes of racial-cultural amalgamation and fusion, driven fundamentally by sexual relations across racial and ethnic barriers, but also by inter-racial conviviality—while they seem to deny racial diversity in the image of a homogenous mixed population and culture (Stutzman 1981), in fact constantly reiterate the presence of such diversity (Wade 2005). Black and indigenous roots are perpetually evoked and, although such ancestral reference may marginalize actually existing populations, there may well also be a constant reference to the presence of blackness and indigenusness within the contemporary nation, not infrequently in highly negative and racist terms (Wade 1993).

Thus in Colombia, the dominance of *bambuco* was challenged by other provinces, who saw themselves being sidelined by central Bogotá political control (Santamaría Delgado 2007), but more importantly it was also the subject of some debate about the presence or absence of African influences in it (Miñana Blasco 1997; Ochoa 1997; Wade 2000). References to the *bambuco* date from 1819 and evoke nascent nationalism from the start: in 1824, a Colombian regimental band played one during a battle against Spanish forces in Peru (Varney 2001, 128). One of the earliest references to the origins of *bambuco*—a reference later blamed for starting the supposedly unfounded notion that *bambuco* had African roots—was in Jorge Isaacs' novel *María* (1867), which became an important work in Hispanic

romantic literature. He talked of the *bambuco* as originating in the African region of Bambuk (on the Senegal-Mali borderlands) and seems to have set the tone for common opinion from then through to the early twentieth century: “The *bambuco* being a music which bears no resemblance to that of the American aborigines nor to Spanish airs, it is not flippant to assert that it was brought from Africa by the first slaves” (Isaacs, cited in Añez 1970 [1951], 25).³

No one seems to have contested this version of events, but others at the time did not specifically refer to it. The politician and essayist José María Samper wrote an elegy to the *bambuco* in a women’s magazine, *El Hogar*, in 1868 and his emphasis was on its national character: “[There is] nothing more national, nothing more patriotic than this melody which counts all Colombians among its authors . . . It is the soul of our *pueblo* [people, nation] made into melody” (Samper 1868). Yet Samper was very inclusive in his approach, and his piece runs through most of the regions of Colombia, describing variants of the style and intoning: “every race, every mestizo variant, every group of our diverse populations has given it [the *bambuco*] their particular character.” He refers, for example, to the Cauca region, where he says “the men have remembered Cain too much”—a likely reference to the idea that the mark of Cain was blackness of the skin—where in the local *bambucos* “one can feel the groan of the black man, once a slave . . . one can perceive the imitative character of the mulatto” (ibid.). (It is worth noting that Samper does not include the Caribbean coastal regions of Colombia—see below.)

By the 1920s, however, there was a polemical debate about the origins of the style and in a backlash movement, one member of the Academy of History stated bluntly: “The version which holds that the *bambuco* might be African is absurd” (Enrique Otero D’Costa, 1932, cited in Añez 1970 [1951], 37). Jorge Añez, who later recounted the polemic in his book on *bambuco*, agreed: “The black Continent has nothing to do with the *bambuco*, either historically or musically” (1970 [1951], 38).

Represented as the soul of the nation by elements in the literate elite, who were not averse to theories of African origins or at least included black people as exponents (albeit “imitative”) of the style, the dominant view by the 1930s debate was that African influences were minimal or absent. Yet even this debate reiterated the possible presence of blackness in the nation. Even when denying direct African origins, “Africa” was being invoked through concepts such as syncopation—*bambuco* has a heavily syncopated rhythm (Varney 2001)—and this was already a diasporic Africa, as the 1930s debate was being conducted in a context in which musical transnationalism

3. All translations from Spanish are my own.

was in full swing in the form of the international recording industry. From the 1910s, Colombia imported gramophones and records, mostly made in the USA; music from Cuba, Mexico, Argentina, the USA, and Europe was listened to in private and public places. In the 1920s, short wave radios picked up broadcasts from abroad, and after 1930 radio stations were started in Colombia itself. The more or less perceptible presence of blackness in US jazz, Cuban *son*, and Argentinean *tango*—although also subject to debates, denials, and white-washings in the Latin American cases—was thus part of the backdrop for discussions about blackness in Colombian music in the 1930s. As we will see below, by the 1940s, there was public concern in some circles about the influence of black music on Colombian society, and it may well be that these rejections of blackness in *bambuco* by Otero, DaCosta, and Añez were a reflection of those concerns. One would need to delve more deeply into the varied discourses about these musical styles in different countries, but I would hypothesize a widespread perception about what “African” or “black” influences sounded like in music, ideas clustered around the drum, the importance of rhythm, the presence of syncopation, and so on. This would constitute an imagined diasporic space.

The Emergence of *Cumbia* and *Porro*

Debates about *bambuco* were basically about ancestry. Although a form of *bambuco* existed as a contemporary style in the Colombian Pacific coastal region—the “black region” par excellence of the nation; marginal, underdeveloped, and about 80–90 percent black—this barely entered into the debates. It has been seen as a totally different kind of music by folklorists, played on African-descended marimbas and drums (Abadía Morales 1983; Davidson 1970; Marulanda 1979), and I have not seen it referred to at all in earlier writings on *bambuco*. However, discussions about blackness, Africa, and *bambuco* were, by the 1930s, taking place in the context of contemporary—and for light-skinned and Europhile elites, much more disturbing—manifestations of blackness in popular music.

From about the 1930s, styles of music associated with peasant ensembles and provincial town brass bands began to be orchestrated by local “jazz-bands” similar in line-up to those performing all over the Americas, which were playing an international repertoire of styles linked to specific countries—Cuban *guaracha*, Argentinean *tango*, Brazilian *maxixe*, US foxtrots, etc.—and styles that had already become effectively transnationalized and were simply labeled *canciones* (songs). These peasant and brass-band genres originated in the Caribbean coastal region of Colombia and were known by various labels: *cumbia* and *porro* came to dominate, but others terms such as *gaita*, *mapalé*, and *fandango* were also common. From the perspective of the

interior of the country, the Caribbean coastal region as a whole was, and still is, seen as a relatively black place, in keeping with its tropical climate and its location on the Caribbean basin. These musical styles—and especially *cumbia* and *mapalé*—were thus also associated not only with peasant and provincial but specifically with black origins. Indigenous influences were also said to be strong, especially in the *gaita* (a Spanish term meaning “pipe” or “horn” but used to refer to a particular type of vertical cane flute of indigenous origin), but also the *cumbia*, which was represented as being a fusion of black and indigenous ancestry (Zapata Olivella 1962).

In their jazz-band orchestrations, these genres made it into the elite social clubs of the Caribbean coastal cities, such as Cartagena and Barranquilla—despite some conservative rearguard action directed at the perceived vulgarity and blackness of the music—and thence into the clubs of the cities of the interior such as Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali, where they also met some stiff resistance at first. Press coverage in the 1940s was distinctly unfriendly at times. One columnist referred to “An explosive African-sounding orchestra [which] now threatens festivities from which the feeling and simplicity typical of previous celebrations are absent” (*El Tiempo*, December 17, 1940, p. 5). One letter-writer accused the music of the *Costeños* (people from the Caribbean coastal region of the country) of being “noisy and strident rhythms, manifestations of the savagery and brutishness of the *Costeños* and Caribbeans, savage and backward peoples.” He added later that the styles were “savage and deafening noises, and they express neither feelings, nor sadness, nor longings, nor happiness (although they may express an orgiastic and bacchanalian happiness), rather on the contrary these airs imitate very well the racket made in the jungle or the forest by a pack of monkeys, parrots or other wild animals” (*Semana*, November 15, 1947, December 13, 1947). Another writer, José Gers, described contemporary dances in Bogotá where “the drums beat, the gentlemen of the orchestra screech with a tragic fury, as if they were seasoning a joyful picnic of some ‘mister’ [i.e., a white boss] in a jungle in Oceania” (*Sábado*, June 3, 1944, p. 13).

This columnist, José Gers, was writing at length on “The Civilization of Color.” He argued that “the blacks have decided to avenge themselves of the bitter destiny that they have inherited”—that is, abduction from Africa, slavery and exploitation. “But now,” he went on,

in our times, praise be to God!, when the whites had congratulated themselves on their advancement and culture, the blacks begin to wreak their long-awaited vengeance in a subtle fashion, and they direct the attack against the thing their previous masters held most dear: against their art. Modern music, for example, has been infiltrated by black art. In any social gathering worth its name, an orchestra with maracas, timbales and drums is indispensable. Bring on the *cumbia*, the *rumba*, the *swing*, the *currulao*. (*Sábado*, June 3, 1944, p. 13)

He goes on to praise the “admirable race, the strong race” which has produced “great [Colombian] poets,” such as Jorge Artel and Candelario Obeso, and other Americans such as “the learned Washington Carver” and the artists and sportspeople, Joe Louis, Marian Anderson, and Josephine Baker. “Time,” he says, “has given you your revenge!”: whites, less “invulnerable” than they seemed, have taken it into their heads to “imitate the blacks and obey them”: “the culture best received these days, especially in the swanky clubs, is that which has the acrid smell of jungle and of sex . . .” In short, “modernism requires this: that we should dance like blacks in order to be in fashion” (*Sábado*, 13).

More clearly now than in the case of *bambuco*, we can see the reference to a black African diaspora by the writer of this piece. Interestingly, the diaspora is rooted in African origins, slavery, and exploitation—which includes domestic service, as one of the features of the women of the “strong race” was that they acted as nursemaids to white children and “enchanted them with tales of deeds historical and fantastic”: these are all classic features of the African diaspora in the Atlantic. More interesting yet, the black diaspora is seen as both savage (the jungle of Oceania) and modern. The reference to Oceania seems mysterious in this context, but it serves to alert us to the international discourse of primitivism which, in the decades leading up to this time, was constructing this link between savagery and modernity—in part via the well-established link between savagery and sex, now re-worked in light of the idea of sexual liberation as modern (Barkan and Bush 1995; Price 2002; Rhodes 1994).⁴

Diaspora here is a space imagined by this writer—his ideas about Africa and black peoples and cultures in the Americas, the importance he gives to music, drums, dance, sex—yet it is also an imaginary shared by many others, black and non-black, albeit with varied and very possibly contradictory perspectives. The role of music in linking different elements of the African diaspora in the Americas and/or “black Atlantic” has been widely noted, for example—whether from the point of view of everyday black and non-black people or academic observers of different stripes (Gilroy 1993; Herskovits 1966; Lomax 1970). The Colombian columnist uses the notion of an African diaspora to establish an only partly ironic narrative of threat, vengeance, savagery, the undermining of one civilization by another, the collapse of traditional morality. But his diasporic “stance,” to use Brubaker’s phrase, is not just a stance: it refers to, draws on, and conjures up a set of real connections and links, which, however, are never free from discursive construction.

4. I am grateful to Sally Price for pointing out the function of the reference to Oceania in this context.

If the letter-writers and columnists evoked diaspora as threat, others saw different, but related possibilities. Gilard (1986; 1994) argued in the 1940s that a kind of *negrismo* emerged in literary circles in the Caribbean coastal region, which also influenced intellectuals in the interior of the country. Black poet Jorge Artel—mentioned by Gers—published a volume of verse, *Tambores en la noche* (*Drums in the night* [1940]), which portrayed the black culture of the Caribbean coastal region as full of sensuality, music, and rhythm, as well as pain and sorrow. It was read by Bogotá intellectuals, including, one imagines, Gers. The black medic, novelist and folklorist from the Caribbean coastal region, Manuel Zapata Olivella, was also an influential figure in these trends: he staged presentations of Costeño “folklore” in Bogotá and published novels about the Caribbean coastal region. From 1940, his brother, Juan, hosted a Bogotá radio program, “La hora costeña” (the coastal hour), which showcased popular Costeño music. Zapata Olivella was linked to the Grupo de Barranquilla, a group of writers and journalists that emerged in the 1940s and included Gabriel García Márquez, at that time a journalist on a Barranquilla paper. Costeño painters such as Alejandro Obregón and Enrique Grau used themes of sensuality and bright color in their paintings, sometimes including images of black women (Medina 1978, 367). All this referred to a very local Costeño folklore and culture, with blackness an uneven presence, sometimes hidden, as when García Márquez wrote about the accordion music of the Caribbean coastal region, without mentioning blackness, sometimes more explicit, as when García Márquez talked of Artel as a “black patriarch measuring the pulse of the fever in the belly of a drum,” accompanied by a “a fruit-like mulatta, made from the same wood as the gaitas” (García Márquez 1981, 94) or another Colombian poet talked of Artel’s evocation of a world in which “the drums and accordions play and the tame, resigned pain of the shadowy race slips by” (Carranza 1944). But the diasporic references are implicit in the imagery of primitivism, of drums, of pain, and “fruit-like” women: these are images and stereotypes of blackness that resonate across the Americas and the black Atlantic. Commentators such as García Márquez were using these images and their connotations to connect Colombia (or its Caribbean region) to transnational currents of modernist primitivism.

It is among the musicians themselves (and their productions as mediated by the record industry) that explicit references to a black diaspora are actually most masked. Lucho Bermúdez, for example, a key band-leader in the popularization of *cumbias* and *porros*, composed one famous number called “Fiesta de Negritos” (note the diminutive form, which many identify as a condescending usage), but this was one of the only direct references to blackness in his oeuvre. Another musician of the period, Clímaco Sarmiento also composed a *porro* titled “Negro, No Te Vayas,” but again this was an isolated mention. Bermúdez listed his musical influences as Pedro

Biava (an Italian immigrant to Colombia who ran the Bellas Artes school in Barranquilla), Ernesto Lecuona (a white Cuban composer), and Rafael Hernández (a white Puerto Rican composer). Blackness was also only intermittently present in the personnel of the orchestras: sometimes in the percussion section; occasionally among the vocalists. What was evoked in this music was tropicality, sun, sea, partying, and *alegría* (fun, happiness); blackness was an unspoken referent, evoked by these meanings linked to these elements—meanings not, of course, confined to a Colombian context but common in the Americas, by the association of the music with the Caribbean coastal region itself, and by the “hot” rhythm the music was felt to have. In the 1960s, when the music was adapted to smaller, more electric line-ups, the album covers frequently deployed images of sex, sun, and sea, but rarely blackness. I think a diasporic blackness was felt, by musicians and record producers, to be part of this music’s popularity, but it was muted and evoked only indirectly.

Huellas De Africanía, Multiculturalism and Gente Afro

From the 1970s on, a series of changes occurred in the profile of blackness in Colombia and its diasporic connections. Black organizations appeared, run by small groups of black university students, protesting against racism, inspired by US antecedents, African-Caribbean *négritude*, African decolonization, and anti-apartheid struggles, but also adapted to the Latin American context by the iconic figure of the *cimarrón*, the escaped slave, who was used to symbolize a specifically Latin American and Caribbean resistance (Wade 1995). For these groups, the African diaspora was in part the idea of origins in Africa, as contributing a distinctive heritage to Colombian black people, but was I think more the idea of an Atlantic circuit of connections, built on the idea of resistance and anti-racism.

A few pioneering Colombian academics began to focus on black culture in Colombia (Friedemann 1984; Friedemann and Arocha 1986), concentrating mostly on the Pacific coastal region, as the real home of a distinctive black culture in the country, and developing the concept of *huellas de africanía* (traces or imprints of Africanism), derived in part from Herskovits and more importantly from Mintz and Price’s model of creolization (Mintz and Price 1976). For these academics, the concept of diaspora was strongly rooted in real, historical links between African cultures and Colombia (Arocha 1998).

In 1991, constitutional reform, which officially declared Colombia to be pluriethnic and multicultural, led to the passing in 1993 of a law directed at “black communities,” which opened the way to land title claims for

these communities located in the Pacific coastal region of the country. The location of blackness in Colombia had shifted its centre of gravity from the Caribbean to the Pacific (Escobar and Pedrosa 1996; Wade 2002). From the point of view of the state, it seems clear that the idea, at least at this time, was to limit the notion of blackness to this region—and indeed its rural parts. While black people were recognized as an “ethnic group” in the nation as a whole, the law really targeted “black communities” in the Pacific region. Any diasporic connections were sidelined in this approach in order to make blackness more manageable and governable.

Musically, things were moving in a rather different direction. For a start, in the Caribbean region, a phenomenon emerged based mainly in Cartagena around street sound systems called *picós* (pick-ups, i.e. turntable needles), which played African and Caribbean popular music on imported vinyl. This came to be known as *champeta*, after the name given to a small machete, which the adherents of these street-system dances allegedly carried around with them (Cunin 2003; Mosquera and Provencal 2000; Pacini Hernández 1996). In due course, local bands began to play *champeta* with Spanish-language lyrics. The music and its fans are generally seen as “black”—and may also be seen as lower-class, vulgar, immoral, violent, sexually licentious, and noisy—although there is little overt ethnic-racial identification with black identity as a political category, for example in the lyrics or among the fans (Cunin 2003).

Yet it is clearly a music that taps into a strong sense of African diaspora. Some of its pioneering and principal exponents come from the village of Palenque de San Basilio, which in colonial times was a *palenque*, or community of escaped slaves that resisted colonial domination, and has retained a specific identity ever since, including a unique creole language, and distinctive funerary rites and musical practices. Strong claims are often made about the African roots of Palenque’s cultural practices. More generally, *champeta* was originally based on listening to West African music. And, in a similar way to what happened with *cumbia* in the 1940s, the blackness of the music is seen by observers as linked to stereotypical images of sexuality and noisiness that are common currency in many areas of the Americas. As with *cumbia*, the music is seen as a threat to morality and order. The fans themselves seem to revel in those images and that threat as a subversive force. They avoid identifying as *negro*—in common with large segments of Cartagena’s working classes—yet they are persistently identified as such. Cunin argues that *champeta* is reduced to a kind of biological determinism: it is seen as a natural expression a racial biology of instincts and urges (Cunin 2003).

A different musical current revolves around rap and hip-hop, by no means always performed by black Colombians but strongly associated

with them, especially in cities such as Cali, which has a large black population (Barbary and Urrea 2004; Wade 1999). The identification with blackness is much clearer and more self-conscious here, with frequent references to the “ghetto” as a social condition and a life-style. The diasporic elements are also very evident, with explicit links made to US and Caribbean musics, famous black figures, such as Malcolm X and Bob Marley, and frequent invocation of “Africa” as a kind of icon (e.g., as a map image painted in Rasta colors) rather than a real geographical location.

Finally, music from the Pacific coastal region has not unexpectedly enjoyed a boom, with the nearby city of Cali setting up a festival de Música del Pacífico in 1997 for “traditional” and “modernized” versions of Pacific coastal folk music, especially of *currulao*, a central genre. A number of new bands have emerged, such as Grupo Bahia and Choc-Quib-Town, which experiment with fusions and “modernizations” of Pacific coast music (Birenbaum Quintero 2006). In addition, some migrants and displaced people from this region set up music and drumming classes in the cities of the interior such as Bogotá, recruiting clientele from sectors such as the middle-class student population. The diasporic connections here are highly varied: the hip-hop oriented Choc-Quib-Town share many of the same cultural spaces and connections with other hip-hop and rap groups. The more *currulao*-oriented Grupo Bahia, in which the African-descended marimba is a key instrument, evoke more of an African connection, but their fusions with jazz look northwards towards the US parts of the black diaspora. Even the “traditional” folkloric groups, usually made up of older participants, are often well-traveled performers aware of the place of Pacific coastal culture in the nation and in the continent. The advent of land-title legislation and official multiculturalism has spurred many “consciousness-raising” workshops about black history and culture, which promote a diasporic vision and encourage local people to identify themselves with other black groups. The recent interest of US foundations (Ford, Inter-American), multilateral agencies (World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank [IADB], UN) and the US Congressional Black Caucus in “Afro-Latins” and “Afro-descendants” has fomented this kind of mental re-positioning of the Pacific coastal region, both within and outside the region itself.

Interestingly, there are indications that the Colombian state is also loosening its restricted definition of blackness, centered on the “black communities” of the Pacific region. In 1993, the national census carried for the first time an “ethnic question,” which included the possibility of identifying oneself as a member of a “black community.” The term was still very new, and few were clear what is really meant and what the implications were: the positive responses to the question were risible: 1.5% identified themselves as belonging to such a community. Over the next ten years or

so, there was intensive discussion about how to reformulate the question, some of it funded by the IADB and the World Bank, and in the 2005 census a very different question was included with a number of different “ethnic” categories: a key option for self-identification was the category “black, mulatto, Afro-Colombian, or Afro-descendant.” This quite inclusive category (together with some much smaller “black” categories) produced a result of 10.5 percent of the total.

The question clearly responds to a more North American definition of black, which is not to say that it was a US imposition or example of the hegemony of post-imperialist racial reasoning (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999): the inclusive category was pushed for mainly by Colombian black organisations, with their roots firmly in the Pacific coastal region and the land-titling agenda there, and by some influential academics. In any event, this new definition—arguably a more “racial” than “ethnic” one in its invocation of phenotypical and genealogical labels rather than local “communities” (Ng’weno 2007)—is reflected in the emerging usage, albeit thus far in limited intellectual circles, of the term “afro” to refer to “black” people (e.g., *una persona afro*—which is probably just a short-hand for *afrocolombiano* or *afrodescendiente*). It seems to me to correspond quite well to a notion of blackness that recognizes a diasporic connectivity. “Afro” in this usage is, in my view, not really invoking Africa as a real historical and cultural place (or set of places); it is invoking a diasporic space which arises “as much from the transformation of Africa by diaspora cultures as from the affiliation of diaspora cultures to Africa and the traces of Africa that those diaspora cultures enclose” (Gilroy 1993, 199). It is a space shaped fundamentally by music.

Conclusion

I think the concept of diaspora has a useful analytic role to play in understanding changing forms and understandings of black music in Colombia. At every turn during the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, black music has to be placed in relation to a wider set of connections, imagined and real (but with the “real” always already within discourse) both with Africa and, especially, with other black cultural spaces in the Americas. The connections are not simple facts but instead complex interweavings of imaginations and concrete relationships and practices. The columnist Gers made wild and improbable connections that linked *cumbia* with jungles in Oceania, as well as with uncontrolled sexuality. Yet his imaginative wanderings made sense—and had discursive power—in terms of transnational fashions in modernist primitivism and long-standing and widespread ideas about black sexuality that reverberate around the African diaspora. A group of “traditional” folklore musicians playing *currulao* in the Festival de Música

del Pacífico in Cali must equally be understood—and arguably also understand themselves—in relation to a continental complex of black musical practices. These local iterations of, and around, blackness are constituted by their relationship to a broader diaspora in which the circulation of meanings among the outlying elements of the complex are more significant than the relationship to a putative point of origin.

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