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¿Ay mama, que será lo quiere el negro?:
 Racialized Representations of Women in La Sonora Dinamita's Cumbias
 Gabriela Jiménez

Race is a complex social component in Colombia and across much of the Americas (Wade 1993, 3). Although scholars have written of Latin American exceptionalism — arguing that racial democracy, compared to racist ideology in the United States, prevailed in Latin America (Sawyer 2006, 21) — the beginnings of contemporary racial dynamics cemented a much more complicated social trajectory; Francesca Miller captures these moments symbolically: “The imagery of the ‘conquest of the Americas’ is overwhelmingly sexual: the white Spanish male, in armor, on horseback, shooting firearms in the ‘virgin territory.’ The visible woman in these accounts is the Indian woman, beautiful, dark, supine, the fruit of the new Eden. The literal and metaphoric imagery is of rape” (1991, 23). To this description of forced miscegenation add centuries of involuntary and voluntary flows of people.

Miller’s quote also accounts for the importance of gender and sexuality. Placed in opposition to the aggressive armed white man is the passive indigenous female who embodies sin. Racialization was, and continues to be, gendered and sexualized. Consequently, an examination of racially-gendered codes is of relevance — where race, gender and sexuality are loaded terms best understood currently as social constructs with vast sociological effects. Maintenance of these constructs points to dynamic processes transmitted in part through mass culture. Under these auspices, we find (popular) music.

Popular music (re)counts stories about Colombia, race, and gender. And in the cumbias of La Sonora Dinamita, one of Colombia’s most popular and internally-known bands, we hear some of these narratives; they are heard musically, as genres coalesce, linguistically, as vocal intonations and deliveries fortify language’s meaning, and lyrically, as words voice common ideas. Yet for the sake of time and space, I focus on what is sung and not on how nor to what these lyrics are sung. Such an analytical approach unveils how, racially, women are categorized simply as either white, *mestiza*, or black. La Sonora Dinamita’s lyrics disclose the racialization of gender through popular culture, I argue, where each label delineates specific gender roles, and where at the base of these constructed identities is the dissemination of racial codes imposed during the colonial experiment and subsequently (re)modified in the never-ending process of forming a nation.

Cumbia, La Sonora Dinamita, and Discos Fuentes

Cumbia is a musical form whose popularity crosses vast geographical boundaries and whose beginnings are exclusively Colombian. Developed initially as a folk expression, cumbia took the shapes of music and dance. Additionally, cumbia came to assert Colombia's multiethnic reality. According to Alissa Rae Simon, "The resulting identifiable tri-ethnic features which are particular to the geography, politics, indigenous cultures, African slaves, and history of the region, has made cumbia a regional symbol on many levels" (1994, 98, 188). As a by-product of years of cultural blending and clashing, cumbia's sociological duty was configured to benefit, encourage, and embody "Colombianness" in the 20th century.¹ Cumbia served as a tool in the construction of a nation. Musically, changes in style redefined it: "It is important to note that the cumbia form that has been exported since the 1950s is one that is stylized, orchestrated and lyricized, contrary to the traditional form...." (Teodoro 1998, 57). La Sonora Dinamita's records circulate cumbia in such a popular and urban form.

First formed in the early 1960s, La Sonora Dinamita reformed in 1977 after a 14-year break (Discos Fuentes 2009b). The group has gone through various line-up changes basing La Sonora Dinamita's impact on the band's music and less on the individual artists involved. The band is part of Discos Fuentes' legacy not only in Colombia but also globally. Founded on October 28, 1934 by Antonio Fuentes in Cartagena, Colombia, the rise of Discos Fuentes occurred as dominant systems were appropriating *costeño* music² (Wade 2000, 29, 160, 172) and as Colombia experienced rapid urbanization (Acevedo 1995, 454; Discos Fuentes 2009b).

Since its reformation in 1977, La Sonora Dinamita combines musical styles — most notably cumbia, salsa, merengue, and boogaloo — from across Latino, African, and Afro-latino diasporas making cumbia a carrier of socialized hybridities. La Sonora Dinamita's history parallels cumbia's role in defining and reflecting racial discourses. Or, like some of the women represented lyrically by La Sonora Dinamita, the musical manifestation known as cumbia, became itself a *mestiza*.

Colombia, Race and Gender

In Colombia specifically and throughout the Americas generally, three hundred plus years of colonialism had vast racial implications on nation-building projects. The (re)structuring of society began when Colombia, part of what was then New Granada, gained its independence from Spain in 1819 (Wade 1993, 8). Colombia's diversity stood as an obstacle in the midst of forming a nation-state.³ Ambivalence towards racial equality — and the abolition of slavery — amid independence movements led to attempts at

blanqueamiento — whitening — during the late 1800s and early 1900s via the immigration of Europeans; however, it was only after the economic crises leading to and stemming from the Stock Market Crash of 1929 that political and cultural “browning” became “embraced...as the essence of being Latin American” (Andrews 2004, 87, 118, 153 and 154).⁴ *Mestizaje* became the solution to the race question as well as the catalyst for contemporary social severalization. Describing *mestizaje*, Peter Wade declares in *Music, Race and Nation*: “Mestizaje, or mixture, both physical and cultural, is a master narrative of national identity for much of Latin America. It involves inclusion and exclusion, affirmations of homogeneity and heterogeneity. (2000, 15).”

La Sonora Dinamita’s “Capullo y Sorullo” showcases the impact of *mestizaje* in contemporary Latin American popular culture. The song traces a marriage between a white woman and a white man as the marriage is described as “Rubio como la mantequilla.” The embrace of *mestizaje* comes through when the song’s plot reveals a twist. The white couple of Capullo and Sorullo have nine children where the ninth is categorized as black (“El noveno resultó ser bien negrito”). After the wife certifies that the black child is indeed legitimate, and, in fact, his only legitimate offspring (“Oye Sorullo el negrito es el único tuyo”), the marriage dissolves and the husband recognizes his son. The fact that a white man acknowledges the possibility of conceiving a black child with a white woman illustrates just how convoluted race is in Colombia and throughout the Americas.

Forming a White Patriarchal Paradigm

Ideologically, not always in praxis, and historically, patriarchy organizes social relations throughout the Americas; racial differentiation stratifies at the foundational level. The centrality given to males — mostly white although not always — grounds socialized divisions. La Sonora Dinamita’s rendition of “El Africano” — the male African — demonstrates the importance of race along patriarchal lines, a reality in place since the conquest.⁵

La Sonora Dinamita’s version of “El Africano” discusses the rape of an ostensibly white woman. The protagonist confesses to her mother that the “Africano” wants to rape her, and possibly already has: “Mama yo me acuesto tranquila me arropo pie y cabeza/Y el negro me destapa.” She describes her assailant by stating that “el negro está rabioso quiere peliar conmigo.” The black man is seen as bestial and violent. Furthermore, we witness the patriarch’s importance as the woman tells her mother to relay the black man’s intentions to her father: “Decíselo a mi papa.” Racialized hierarchies emerge from a white patriarchal (and

heteronormative) system relying on and justifying stereotypes. Therefore, popular songs tend to disseminate the dominant voice regardless of the singer's socialized mass and/or self identifications.⁶

Representations of White Women

Racialized gender norms in La Sonora Dinamita's songs characterize white women as untouchable virgins with agency. "El Apagon" and "El Paraguas" serve to illustrate this. This social position evolved from colonial norms as Jaime Humberto Borja proclaims:

El avance del peligroso mestizaje desde los primeros días de la presencia europea, hizo tener por la integridad de las costumbres cristianas y la misma estructura patriarcal. Fue entonces cuando, sistemáticamente, el ideal y hasta imaginario cultural de la identificación de la mujer blanca y española moralmente pura con los valores de la Virgen María, entró en contraposición con la mujer-tentación, la Eva, la indígena, la negra y la mestiza (1995, 51).

The white woman is presented as an idealized embodiment of purity sharing the qualities of the Virgin Mary as opposed to the temptress, Eve, the indian, the black, and the *mestiza*. Such is the case in "El Apagon." In the song, the female asks her father for forgiveness since she transgressed the Virgin ideal. She went against the norm by having "amores a escondidas." The covert nature of her sexual liaisons reveals the expectations of white women as they must remain pure.

Racially closer to the dominant order, white women, as opposed to *mestizas* or black women, are given a voice and thus a higher place in socialized hierarchies. "El Paraguas" reflects this. The song is an interplay between a white woman and a black man. "El Paraguas" utilizes metaphors to proclaim the white woman's agency since she is the one who conceives of opening her "umbrella." She states: "Tengo que abrir el paraguas." The black man hopes she will open her "umbrella" as he states: "Ábrete paraguas, ábrete paraguas." But, as a white woman with agency, she will make the final decision.

Representations of Mestizas

According to the lyrics of La Sonora Dinamita, *mestizo* women stand discursively between white and black women. They are not white nor are they black, and thus, of African descent. Their role in society is a juggling of white and black gendered realities.

Derived from an indigenous ancestry, *mestizas* hold an ambiguous place within the social order due to their indigenous heritage. In *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, Peter Wade notes the regard for indigenous peoples: "Indians and Africans thus had different locations in the colonial order, both socially and conceptually. Indians were, officially, to be protected as well as exploited...." (Wade 1997, 27). The

ambivalent attitude toward indigenous peoples attributes *mestizas'* limbo: objectified to a lesser extent than black women but nevertheless not white.

Lyrically, “Mi Cucu” transmits *mestizas'* racially-gendered position. The song reveres and objectifies the female *mestizo* body. The male’s voice evaluates the *morena's* body: “Que lindo es tu cucu, tan bello tu cucu/Redondito y suavecito, que lindo es tu cucu.” Her *derrière* is both beautiful and lovely. Despite its glorification, objectification of the *mestiza's* body prevails. The man in the narrative wants to possess the *morena's* body: “No me canso de mirar, pero quisiera tocar/Andale no seas malita/Yo quiero una tocadita.” The male gaze does not cease its dominance as it also signifies potential premeditated sexual actions since looking suggests his desire to touch. Occurring simultaneously with the *mestiza's* objectification is her agency. The *morena* in “Mi Cucu” responds to the man who wishes to touch her. She tells him, “Si quieres puedes ver lo que a ti te de la gana/Pero si intentas tocar te dare una cachetada/No te metas con my cucu.” Basically, he can look but he better not touch.

Representations of Black Women

La Sonora Dinamita’s “La Frutera” details the space given socially to black women. This too is a reality emerging as a consequence of colonialism, (re)developed in the nation-building experiment, and continuously prevalent today.

Perceived as hypersexual objects, Afro-Colombian women engender(ed) sin. This general belief justified and justifies their sexual availability and exploitation. As Nina S. De Friedemann reveals while quoting Suzy Bermúdez’s historical analysis of *afrocolombianas*, “A las esclavas, y en particular a las mulatas, se les veía ‘mas aptas’ para la vida sexual por su debilidad inata frente al pecado” (1992, 54). Recalling Eve, *La frutera's* social place follows a historical trajectory where the trade of fruit explains social damnation.

The song claims that “La negra sabrosa” happily sells fruit. The allusion to food plays a meaningful role. Like in salsa music, “songs construct Black bodies as objects of play and desire for consumption. This consumption via the act of sexual intercourse and marked by the climax is frequently expressed using metaphors of food” (Sawyer 2006, 91). This is the case in “La Frutera.” The black fruit seller professes, “Tengo para la venta melones y bananos/Y muy dulce traigo la piña y la papaya/No toques la papaya pues me hace estremecer/La tengo muy blandita y todos quieren comer/Chupa y saborea la fruta jugosa.” She offers melons, bananas, sweet pineapple and papaya. She begs for her papaya to be touched because it makes her tremble. Her papaya is ripe, so ripe in fact, that everyone wants to eat, suck (lick) and savor the

juicy fruit. The black woman's voice is one that affirms her perceived hypersexuality, and consequently substantiates her position in society.

In the second verse the fruit seller reveals that she is also known as "la cumbia morena" due to the fact that she moves as if she were dancing ("pues muevo las caderas como cuando lo hago al bailar"). This multi-identification projects "inclusionary discrimination" where "The concept of a hierarchy allows us to think of racism not as a dichotomous variable but rather as a continuum that changes over time" where "Race determines the *terms* of inclusion" (Sawyer 2006, 19). *La frutera*'s bodily movements allow her to be referred to as a *morena* (*mestiza*). And yet her hypersexualization remains intact. Her initial and primary status as a *negra* combined with her potential classification as a *mestiza* include her in society but exclude her agency.

Conclusion

As a cultural ambassador, La Sonora Dinamita represents Colombia. Views on women, transmitted by the band's lyrics, sound the nationalist agenda enacted since Colombia's independence. In the midst of constructing a nation, those who took charge of the project, Colombia's elites, (re)appropriated racialized and gendered norms put in place during the colonial experiment. The repercussions have spanned time and space. Nearly 200 years since its inception, the nation of Colombia continues to expand on these methods of socialization — notwithstanding the influence of social class, sexual preference(s), level of education and the like.

Lyrical representations of women in songs by La Sonora Dinamita comment on the racialization of gender in Colombia specifically and the rest of the Americas potentially. Popular ideologies place white women as idealized virgins with the tools for self-agency while black women saturate the realm of the hypersexual as objects speaking of their availability. *Mestizas*, on the other hand, inhabit the ambiguous space of the in between. Not overtly objectified but not idealized either; their voice is nominal.

Social codes are subject to change too. "Capullo y Sorullo," "El Apagon," and "Saca la Maleta" all refer to women's increasing sexual independence. In "Capullo y Sorullo" a woman utilizes her agency to end a marriage ("El matrimonio acabó/Ella se fue con los ojos"). "El Apagon" communicates greater acceptance in having a child out-of-wedlock ("Cálmate papi que ahora somos cuatro"). And, "Saca la Maleta" recites a growing push towards contraceptive use (Como a mí me gusta todo por delante/.../Te tienes que poner guantes/Mira que vamos a peliar."). Continuously morphing, social views on women

remain subject to economic, cultural, ecological and regional shifts. Race will most likely continue to play a major role. And, (popular) music will reveal how so.

Notes

1 This occurred as other musical forms became incorporated into the dominant order across the Americas: “Brazilian samba, Cuban rumba and son, and Dominican meringue....commercial pressures and state support transformed these genres from black street music into icons of national popular culture” (Andrews 2004, 167).

2 *Costeño* music stems from La Costa — Colombia’s Atlantic Coast. In the words of Peter Wade, “Costeño music is identified as foreign, black, immoderate, and vulgar; it is also explicitly linked to sexual license” (2000, 128). Furthermore, music given the moniker also served ideological aims: “part of the success of Costeño music was the ambivalent potential it had for being read in different and contradictory ways; for being black, white, and mixed; for being traditional and modern; for being regional and national” (Wade 2000, 143). And finally, “*Música tropical* (or sometimes *música bailable*, dance music) became a generic term, used to refer to all varieties of Costeño music...” (Wade 2000, 145).

3 Wade links nationalism and race in post-Independence Colombia; he acknowledges: “Like elites in other countries in Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Colombian political and intellectual circles were striving to define their nationhood. They were faced with a heterogeneous country, broken into regions which could communicate only with difficulty due to poor infrastructure and a broken terrain, all of which had large populations seen as mixed and several of which had large numbers of people identified by elites as negros (black) or Indios (indigenous peoples)” (2000, 30).

4 Wade writes the following about *blanqueamiento*: “by envisaging a future in which blackness and indianness are not only absorbed but also *erased* from the national panorama, giving rise to a *whitened* mestizo nation, struggles in discrimination [arise as it] turns the vision into impossible utopia.” (1993, 19)

5 “At the risk of deshistoricizing, it seems that from an early date black ‘sexuality’ has been made a seedbed in which non blacks—particularly men—have cultivated ideas about themselves. Ideals of civilization, purity, and control over (human) nature were opposed to black sexuality such as bestial, primitive....” (Wade 2000, 19).

6 Writing about female salsa singers, Frances R. Aparicio states, “Women singers are allowed to perform on stage as long as they sing the words of others and as long as, in some cases, they play to the desires and fantasies of a male audience whose gaze continues to objectify female bodies” (1998, 173).

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