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Author
Caicedo, Patricia

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Memory, Nostalgia, and Resistance: The Afro-Latin Art Song

PATRICIA CAICEDO
Barcelona Festival of Song

Abstract
As in the rest of the American continent, as a result of the Atlantic slave trade between the XV and XIX centuries, Latin America received a large number of people from Africa, a population forced to abandon their places of origin, leaving behind their families and culture. Motivated by nostalgia and the need to keep their memory and identity, the African diaspora developed alternative resistance mechanisms despite the acculturation processes. Dispossessed of material goods, they used sound, language, and rituals to keep their culture alive. In time, the immaterial and symbolic goods they created penetrated the societies in which they lived, sometimes becoming mainstream through a whitening process that threatened to dispossess them once more of their symbolic wealth. By observing the art song that resulted from the collaboration of poets and composers of the African diaspora in Latin America, we will analyze how the use of melodic, rhythmic, idiomatic, and textual elements in music worked as a strategy to integrate, penetrate, maintain, and reproduce their cultures of origin as well as to participate in the avant-garde and international artistic conversations, becoming a tool for social mobility and a mechanism for gaining social and political rights.

Keywords: afro-latin music, Art Song, decolonial thought, Brazilian art song, Afrocubanism, Latin American art song

Resumen
Al igual que en el resto del continente americano, como resultado del comercio atlántico de esclavos entre los siglos XV y XIX, América Latina recibió un gran número de personas provenientes de África, una población obligada a abandonar sus lugares de origen, dejando atrás a sus familias y su cultura. Motivada por la nostalgia y la necesidad de mantener su memoria e identidad, a pesar de los procesos de aculturación, la diáspora africana desarrolló mecanismos alternativos de resistencia. Desposeídos de bienes materiales, utilizaron el sonido, el lenguaje y los rituales para mantener viva su cultura. Con el tiempo, los bienes inmateriales y simbólicos que crearon penetraron en las sociedades en las que vivían, convirtiéndose con frecuencia en parte de la cultura dominante a través de un proceso de blanqueamiento que amenazaba con desposeerlos una vez más de su riqueza simbólica. Al observar la canción artística que resultó de la colaboración entre poetas y compositores de la diáspora africana en América Latina, analizaremos cómo el uso de elementos melódicos, rítmicos, idiomáticos y textuales en la música funcionó como una estrategia para integrar, penetrar, mantener y reproducir sus culturas de origen, así como para participar en las vanguardias estéticas internacionales, convirtiéndose en una herramienta para la movilidad social y un mecanismo para obtener derechos sociales y políticos.

Palabras clave: música afro-latina, Canción artística, Pensamiento decolonial, Canción artística brasileña, Afrocubanismo, Canción artística latinoamericana

The psychiatrist and Antillean revolutionary Frantz Fanon, one of the most influential thinkers of the African diaspora in the Caribbean in the 20th century, pointed out in the 1960s that although it may seem normal for us today that descendants of Africans critically reflect on reality, this situation is paradoxical according to the logic of modernity. The paradox lies in the fact that individuals who were considered irrational came to exercise reason, as the exercise of reasoning was associated with whiteness (Maldonado-Torres 2005: 151). With this assertion, Fanon highlighted that racism is

epistemic and not only affects capitalism, institutions, and gender dynamics, but that it also manifests itself in knowledge (Lander 2000; Quijano 2000). The experience of encountering epistemic racism has profoundly impacted the efforts of black intellectuals, giving rise to decolonial thinking that still holds substantial sway in the present. This has paved the way in Latin America for schools of thought that encompass, but are not confined to, postcolonial studies, critique of colonial discourse, subaltern studies, Afrocentrism, and post-occidentalism.

In the 21st century, epistemic racism persists conspicuously within the curriculum of classical singers, firmly rooted in Eurocentric teaching paradigms that perpetuate musical traditions originating from historical centers of power. This phenomenon extends beyond the confines of music, permeating diverse spheres of knowledge. Despite the surpassing of the colonial era, marked by the establishment of an openly justified and legitimized asymmetrical and hegemonic order by colonial powers that dictated political, economic, and cultural structures, racism continues to endure in knowledge construction. This persistence is a direct consequence of the prevailing influence of the coloniality of knowledge. When referring to coloniality, we acknowledge the structural and persistent existence of thought paradigms and ways of doing and knowing that consciously and unconsciously perpetuate the domination structures of the colonial era. In the words of Aníbal Quijano, it is a "colonization of the imaginary of the dominated. That is, it acts within the interiority of that imaginary. To some extent, it is part of it" (Quijano 1992: 14). Quijano posited that coloniality constitutes a foundational element of modernity, forming the bedrock of the geopolitical division of the world into centers and peripheries. He illustrates how, at the inception of the human sciences, we witnessed the suppression of the historical multivocality of humanity. Since then, the history of Europe has become synonymous with universal history. In music, the history of European music became synonymous with universal music history. The territorial and economic expropriation conducted by Europe in the colonies corresponds to an epistemic expropriation that relegated the knowledge produced in these colonies to merely being the "past" of modern science (Castro-Gómez 2005: 47).

Acculturation practices stemmed from the dehumanization of the colonial "other," involving the devaluation of their traditions, customs, and all forms of expression. Although colonial practices have existed since ancient times, with the arrival of European conquerors in America in 1492, these practices intensified, marking the beginning of modernity. For Europe, the encounter with the "other" coincided with the discovery of itself. In this process, Europe positioned itself on a superior scale, viewing the other as someone to subjugate, expropriate, and dominate. The dialectic of center and peripheries was established, with Europe as the center and the colonies as the peripheries. The center, which possesses the means of control, exploitation, production, and control institutions, establishes a form of relationship—the capitalist system—that seeks the accumulation of wealth in the centers financed by the dispossession of the assets of the majority in the peripheries (Fanon 2009: 7). Thus, the colonizing enterprise expands throughout the entire American continent, transplanting its social and relational models to new territories while attempting to erase the cultural elements of the colonized cultures in a process known as acculturation.

One of the transplanted forms of relationship and exploitation by the colonizers was slavery, as a system of wealth accumulation—a prevalent practice in the ancient world. To such an extent, civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, Greece, and Rome developed laws and customs to legitimize and regulate slavery (Legras 2016: 2).

The Iberian Peninsula was not immune to this phenomenon. In medieval Spain, between the years 1483 and 1488, enslaved Black people comprised most of the slave population in Seville. Various studies document that in 1565, in the archdiocese of Seville, there were 459,362 people, of whom

44,670 were slaves—meaning enslaved individuals represented 9.7% of the population. Meanwhile, Lisbon had 9,950 enslaved people among its 100,000 inhabitants in 1551 (García and Chávez 2009: 601). By the end of the Middle Ages, enslaved individuals came from the four major Portuguese trading posts: Arguin, Santiago de Cabo Verde, San Jorge da Mina, and Santo Tomé (Franco Silva 1978: 68). The epicenter of the slave trade at that time was Cape Verde, serving as a distribution hub across the Atlantic, including Portugal, Spain, and the Americas.

One of the most significant distribution points was Seville, where enslaved people were sent to the New World to address the urgent need for labor caused by the decline in the indigenous population and the demand from the affluent classes. By purchasing enslaved people, these wealthy individuals replicated the social habits of their places of origin. The influx of slaves and the exploitation of indigenous populations in the colonies established hierarchical relationships among the subjugated individuals, manifested since then in the form of racism against indigenous and Black people. The colonial "other," whether indigenous or Black, had even their humanity questioned (García García, Maceiras Fafian, and Méndez 2011: 81). They had to wait until the promulgation of the papal bull Sublimis Deus by Pope Paul III in 1537 to be recognized as human. However, instead of being a genuine gesture of liberation, the bull served as a tool of dominance and power consolidation, facilitating the imposition of Christian doctrine upon colonized populations through evangelization.

According to data from SlaveVoyages.org,[1] approximately 10,642,167 million enslaved people embarked on ships, of which only 9,186,396 million arrived in the Americas. In Latin America, the regions that received the most enslaved people were Brazil and Cuba, followed by Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico. It is known that the first enslaved people to arrive in the New World came from the Iberian Peninsula, predominantly spoke Spanish, and practiced Christianity or Islam, suggesting that they were already enslaved on the peninsula, confirming that slave ownership was a common practice there. However, as commercial needs in the American colonies increased, the importation of enslaved people directly from Africa began. These individuals had been abruptly separated from their place of birth, family, and culture. These enslaved people were known as "bozales," completely culturally isolated, with no social or cultural ties connecting them to their place of origin. In other words, if these individuals attempted to escape, they had no contact or place to go. According to anthropologist Claude Meillassoux, these people were desocialized and torn away from their places of origin, family, and community. They were depersonalized, treated as commodities, desexualized by the denial of their reproductive rights, and decivilized by being separated from their institutions and communities (Meillassoux 1986 [1991]: 99–116).

However, despite the risks involved, numerous enslaved people escaped to form maroon communities in remote and hidden places known as "palenques" in Colombia, Venezuela, and Cuba, or "quilombos" in Brazil. Palenques and Quilombos represented spaces of freedom where social habits from their places of origin could be reproduced. While most of these maroon communities were destroyed, some, such as San Basilio in Colombia, Nirgua in Venezuela, San Lorenzo and Cujila in Mexico, and the settlements of Esmeraldas in Ecuador, were successful and managed to negotiate peace treaties that guaranteed them self-governance (Andrews 2007: 66).

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[1] The SlaveVoyages website is a collaborative digital initiative that compiles and makes publicly accessible records of the largest slave trades in history. It allows to search these records to learn about the broad origins and forced relocations of more than 12 million African people who were sent across the Atlantic in slave ships, and hundreds of thousands more who were trafficked within the Americas. See https://www.slavevoyages.org/.

In the maroon communities, formerly enslaved people formed societies that preserved languages, rituals, songs, and dances from their places of origin. These expressions manifested nostalgia for the places they left behind, tools for preserving memory, and spaces of resistance. These activities represented a struggle against the desocialization, decivilization, desexualization, and depersonalization described earlier, highlighting the complexity of the various resistance processes that have allowed African culture to endure to the present day.

It is crucial to emphasize that although historiography has often defined resistance as synonymous with rebellion or armed struggle, positioning the Haitian Revolution as the only successful slave revolution in the Americas, resistance took many forms during the colonial period. It manifested as strikes and uprisings but primarily through music, dance, rituals, and religious practices.

In extensive areas of Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, religious syncretism occurred, leading to the emergence of religious practices such as Candomblé, Umbanda, Xango, and Batuque in Brazil, Vodou in Haiti, and Santería in Cuba. These religions integrate elements from African religions and Catholicism. In these religious rites, expressions in the original African languages were preserved, incorporating dances and songs in the Yoruba language from Western Africa. These elements are still maintained today (Nakanyete 2018: 110–30). The penetration of these cultural practices was so intense, and the gatherings of slaves and free blacks in the streets were so frequent, that in many places, laws were created to control the so-called "batuques."

Rogerio Budasz, in his book *Opera in the Tropics*, cites testimonies such as that of a French traveler in 1827 in Montevideo, who, upon observing street dances, wrote: "More than a hundred blacks seemed to have conquered, for a moment, their nationality in the heart of that imaginary homeland, whose memory made them forget, for a single day of pleasure, the many deprivations and pains of years of slavery" (Budasz 2019: 54).

According to Andrews, although colonial society intended to position the African black solely as a slave, as the property of a master, between 1500 and 1800, the development of colonial economies and the actions and initiatives of the enslaved people altered the original plan. Enslaved people assumed various roles, gradually gaining control over their bodies, time, and access to material resources (Andrews 2007: 66).

As a result, by the early 19th century, in some places in Latin America, the population of free blacks and mulattos outnumbered that of enslaved people, except in Brazil or Cuba (Andrews 2007: 70). Manumission was more common in Spanish and Portuguese America than in English or French America. In Brazil, for example, numerous enslaved people negotiated their freedom in exchange for work in the mining industry during the gold rush in Minas Gerais.

By 1800, free blacks represented 40% of the African-origin population in Minas Gerais. Quickly, the black and mulatto population infiltrated society, surpassing the number of whites and engaging in a variety of occupations, including music, as it was not a profession of prestige or social valuation (Legrás 2016: 3). According to Rogerio Budazs:

> Most musicians in the city were black and brown or mulatto, not only because their combined population far exceeded the number of whites but also due to the disdain with which society viewed music as a profession. Regarding the introduction of Sub-Saharan music in Brazil, although evidence is scarce, it is likely that many first and second-generation slaves were bimusical, much like they were bilingual. While mulattos playing African instruments are rarely described, there are many reports and illustrations of blacks in the streets of Rio playing not only African membranophones, lamellaphones, and multi-string bows but also European guitars, violins, and winds (Budasz 2011: 154).

The first opera house in Rio de Janeiro opened in 1747. Years later, on September 22, 1767, José Maurício Nunes García was born in the same city. He is considered one of the most influential composers in the Americas, with a repertoire that rivals, in quantity and quality, that of the great European composers of his time.

José Maurício, the son of a couple of free mulattos, descendants of enslaved people, was appointed in 1798 as the chapel master of the Episcopal See of Rio de Janeiro. In 1808, due to the advance of Napoleon's troops in Europe, the Portuguese court fled to its colonies, settling in Rio de Janeiro. They brought musicians, poets, and courtly life, making Brazil the only place on the continent to host a royal family. This situation significantly impacted the flourishing of local music, benefiting José Maurício, who was appointed the Master of the Royal Chapel in the same year. He composed hundreds of sacred works and songs with Portuguese texts.[2]

Thanks to its unique history, Brazil was the only country in the region where the abolition of slavery did not occur in the context of war, as no wars of independence were fought there, a situation that contrasts with much of Spanish America, where a significant number of enslaved people negotiated their freedom in exchange for fighting in the independence wars of the 19th century. In Brazil, the proclamation of independence took place on September 7, 1822, by the heir to the throne, Pedro I, who became the emperor. The resulting regime was the Empire of Brazil, a constitutional monarchy that lasted until 1889, making it the longest-lasting independent monarchy in America.

One hundred years later, in February 1922, the Week of Modern Art was celebrated in São Paulo. This event brought together artists from different disciplines to reflect on the meaning of being Brazilian. The week was led by the Afro-Brazilian musician, poet, folklorist, musicologist, historian, writer, and social leader Mário de Andrade (1893–1945). He dedicated years to studying the folklore of various regions of Brazil, collecting and transcribing numerous melodies to provide the population, especially composers, with tools to understand the richness and diversity of Brazilian music. He aimed to inspire them to incorporate those elements into their nationalist compositions.

In many of his writings, Andrade highlighted the influence of African music on Brazilian music and encouraged composers to connect with the music of the "people," a term he used to refer to folklore. In his influential work "Ensaio sobre a música brasileira," published in 1928, he advocated connecting folk, popular, and classical music (Andrade 1972: 6).

For Andrade, language was central to the nationalist project, serving as a standard and unifying element for such a vast country's different cultures and social classes. His particular interest in studying Portuguese and his desire to liberate spoken Portuguese in Brazil from the constraints imposed by Portuguese grammar led him to explore new means of expression in literature and music.

The song was at the core of his project, to the extent that in 1930, he compiled the famous collection of songs titled "Modinhas Imperiais," in which the preface provides suggestions on how to interpret Portuguese. He advised singers to sing the same way they speak, addressing diction and criticizing the Italianization of sung Portuguese. He believed that a European timbre would de-characterize Brazilian songs (Andrade 1930: 3).

These concerns about the interpretation of sung Portuguese also influenced composers of art songs and culminated in the First Congress of the Sung National Language in 1937. This event, which aimed to standardize the pronunciation of sung Brazilian Portuguese, was much more than an academic reflection. It was primarily a political space for reaffirming nationalist ideas. By attempting

[2] His catalog and a large portion of his scores can be found on the website http://www.josemauricio.com.br

to establish norms for singing in the country's language, it sought to define a linguistic identity for the nation—a national timbre. The resulting norms from this first congress were published in 1938.

The song became the primary medium for attempts to construct a national identity. This development eventually synthesized into two main types of Brazilian art songs, which became the most important types: the modinha and the lundú. These emerged through complex transformations, turning folk songs into popular songs and then infiltrating the salons of classical music. This process was fueled by population movements from rural to urban areas, bringing African rituals to cities with subsequent stylization and sophistication. Of African origin, the lundú was originally a dance introduced to Brazil by enslaved people of Bantu descent from Angola. In its early days, it was rejected and criticized for being considered indecent. As a dance, it quickly declined to develop in urban areas as a song.

Although the African-origin population was economically and socially marginalized, their influence on urban culture became increasingly evident. In this way, forms such as the lundú, maxixe, samba, and Brazilian tango were incorporated into popular music (Béhague 1966: 26). These and other forms influenced composers of "classical" music who, inspired by the modernist and nationalist discourse of Andrade and the European trend of interest in the primitive, predominantly African elements, incorporated these influences into their works. Thus, figures like Heitor Villa-Lobos, Camargo Guarnieri, Francisco Mignone, and later Cesar Guerra-Peixe reinterpreted musical elements of African origin, such as syncopation, modulation to the subdominant, melodic ornamentation, and rhythmic repetitions (Béhague 1966: 27).

As mentioned earlier, the preservation of African deities, the use of their names, and the associated rituals were forms of resistance and the maintenance of the memory of Afro-descendants. They were also strategies to preserve language so successfully that, today, African languages are present in religious practices such as Candomblé, Santería, and Voodoo—religions followed by people of various ethnicities worldwide. In Candomblé are the Orixás,[3] mediators between the Supreme God—Olorum—and the practitioners. These beings, originating in Africa and invoked in Brazil, humanize forces of nature such as oceans/rivers, thunderstorms, etc. They represent the essence of a being, their personality, or soul.

Considering that enslaved individuals came from various regions of Africa with different religions and gods, the construction of the Orixás was a practical strategy, as it brought together different gods in the same space. Religious cults devoted to the Orixás served as spaces of cultural resistance, where languages and music were preserved. Many of their ritual chants have served as a source of inspiration for art songs that evoke the sound of African languages, a situation that is evident in the Cánticos de Obaluayé[4] or "Quizomba"[5] by composer Francisco Mignone (1897–1986)

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[3] Among the Orixás we find Exú: Messenger of God, malicious Satan, and sacrificial offerings; Oxúm: Goddess of fresh water and sensual love; Ogum, Oxossi, Ode: Gods of iron, steel, war, revolution, and hunting; Yemanja/Iemanjá: Mother of various gods, water, resides in the sea; Xango: Fire, thunder, lightning; Yansa/Iansa: Wife of Xango, storm and lightning; Ibêji: Children, fun, and joy; Nanã: Very ancient goddess, lives in the marsh; Obaluaé/Omolu: Suffering, healing of diseases; and Osain/Ossaim: Medicinal herbs/medicine.

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38OAW9Kskos

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NP4eoNwnEC0

or in the songs in Yoruba, the "Oratorio Candomblém,"[6] "Cantata Negra - Xangô,"[7] and the orchestral work "Cantos a los Orixás"[8] by composer José de Lima Siqueira (1907–85), which evoke the chants, percussion, and rhythmic ritual motifs.

In his song "Abaluaiê,"[9] the Amazonian composer Waldemar Henrique (1905–95), besides using the Yoruba language or onomatopoeic sounds of ritual chants, describes in the score the characteristics of the Orixá, including its attire, colors, and dance style, indicating the song's source and placing its origin in Salvador de Bahía. The song, an invocation to the Orixá Abaluaiê, is written for tenor and piano, with the piano acting as a harmonic, melodic, and percussive element. Listening to the same song by Clementina de Jesús (1901–1987),[10] one of Brazil's most important Afro-descendant folk singers, reveals the connections between folk and classical songs and the tremendous flexibility of the song genre defined by its performance practice.

Examples of art songs inspired by African ritual chants include "Ê-bango, bango-ê" by Dinorah de Carvalho (1895–1980)[11] and "Tres poemas afro brasileiros"[12] by Camargo Guarnieri (1895–1980), one of the most prolific composers of chamber songs in 20th-century Brazil. These works exemplify a trend that influenced numerous composers across different generations, showcasing the quest for a national musical identity based on elements of African culture including, more recently, the composer José Siqueira (Santos 2021: 135–50).[13]

According to Gerard Behague, non-religious music of predominantly Black Brazilians has been more accessible to researchers thanks to the works of Waldeloir Rego, who studied the songs and dances of capoeira in his book "Capoeira Angola" (Rego 1968),[14] and the music of the Recife Carnival known as Maracatú, thanks to the work of Guerra-Peixe (Béhague 1982: 17–32).[15]

The African influence in Latin American art song

At the beginning of the 19th century, after achieving national independence in Latin America, processes of national identity construction began. This identity, imagined by European elites and their descendants, initially excluded cultural elements of marginalized populations—indigenous and Black people. Processes of social and cultural whitening were established in all areas.

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[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSh-PhNUzGk

[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f98qmZJKwQ

[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9X_6Pn2RB0

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldvg90DWsr4

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAzRSBYb2-c

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yq1_KgfR4qA

[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFaByivQXBk

[13] https://musica.ufrj.br/index.php/musica-de-camara/591-jose-siqueira

[14] https://capoeiravoltaaomundo.com.br/download/arquivos/Livros/Capoeira-Angola-Ensaio-soci

[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBWViT1BQ_o

In the realm of art song, this situation initially manifested in the composition of songs in German, Italian, and French, following the fashions and styles of European art song, and in the creation of National Anthems composed mainly by European musicians who imitated the music in vogue among the elites of the time, opera. The songs of this era reflect the elites' desire to construct an identity resembling that of Europe, apparently homogeneous, denying the very existence of African and indigenous contributions. However, as the ruling classes of the new nations felt that integrating excluded populations was necessary for economic expansion, and coinciding with the European nationalist movement that revalued rural and traditional music of their own countries, Latin American composers, mostly belonging to the elites and educated in Europe, begin to use folk motifs and integrate melodic and rhythmic elements from African or indigenous music, giving rise to mestizo sounds. (Caicedo 2019) Simultaneously, as music was not a socially prestigious profession, descendants of enslaved people and freed individuals began to work as musicians, learning Western music techniques and styles while gradually introducing African rhythmic, tonal, melodic, and linguistic elements.

The Caribbean, particularly Cuba, received hundreds of thousands of enslaved people. Due to its strategic location, Cuba was an important military port from the colony's beginning, serving as a transit point for ships and trade. However, it was only in 1871, due to the Haitian Revolution that disrupted the plantation economy on the neighbouring island, that Cuba's economy transformed, becoming a center for sugar production requiring large amounts of labor. Consequently, when many places in Latin America were reducing the importation of enslaved people, in Cuba, it intensified, reaching high quotas. In 1841, 58.5% of the population was mulatto or Black (Moore 1997: 16).

The significant African-origin population had a profound impact on the cultural practices of the island, to the extent that Spanish colonizers felt threatened and implemented laws to repress artistic expressions. Decrees prohibiting dance and song, especially those associated with religious rituals and percussion, were introduced. In fact, African culture was not considered culture by the white intellectuals of the time; rather, it was viewed as a sort of regressive barbarism that needed to be vehemently addressed (Moore 1997: 18).

Despite restrictions, many free Afro-descendants of the middle class in Cuba successfully engaged in music, becoming notable performers of European classical music. The adoption of European cultural practices provided them with social mobility. However, the actual acceleration of the assimilation of the African population and culture occurred after the wars of independence, in which Afro-Cubans actively participated.

As in the rest of the region, despite the assimilation, tensions, and controversy persisted regarding what was authentically Cuban and which elements constituted its national identity, an identity constructed by the elites who invented an idealized nation, initially denying the existence and contribution of Africans but gradually, for economic and political reasons, were compelled to incorporate more and more cultural elements from these populations. Thus, music that was initially attacked and denigrated for its association with African culture gradually became assimilated into the national discourse, eventually becoming symbols of identity, as in the case of the Danzón or the Son.

From the late 19th century to the early decades of the 20th century, an important factor that significantly contributed to this development was the influence of the European Afro-philic movement, which impacted the Americas, awakening an awareness of the contribution and value of African culture in music, literature, dance, and painting. In France, where the movement originated, tribal objects from exploited cultures were used in the artistic realm and displayed in European museums—similar to Picasso's approach—decontextualizing and erasing their violent colonial past.

By using African art in this way, it was stripped once again of its intrinsic value, this time in a subtle manner that seemingly sought to valorize and legitimize, but in doing so condescendingly from the position of the colonizer, produced a bittersweet effect.

In the Americas, the Afro-philic movement gave rise to numerous artistic works that gradually introduced and assimilated African elements into the identity of different regions, not without contradictions. It is fascinating to observe the incorporation of these elements into the art-song genre, especially considering its roots in a musical style traditionally associated with urban white elites. This genre, typically performed in private spaces such as salons, is characterized by piano accompaniment and adherence to the conventions and language of Western chamber music. However, during this time, there was a gradual whitening process and adaptation of African and mestizo musical elements to the European language. This phenomenon is evident in the transformation of the characteristic sound of the guitar, which adapts and transposes to the piano as a sort of elevation and legitimization. A similar phenomenon occurs with rhythmic elements, which transfer to the piano, becoming abstractions. This process reveals the complex dynamics of legitimation, constant negotiations, and power struggles that consistently flow in the same direction, from "bottom to top," adopting the aesthetics and conventions of powerful groups.

Thus, in various regions of the Americas, especially in countries with a significant Afro-descendant presence, aesthetic movements emerged to revalue this contribution and integrate it into the language of the dominant classes. In the United States, the New Negro Movement or Harlem Renaissance appeared (Mitchell 2010). In Cuba, the Afro-Cuban movement arose, propelled by the poet Nicolás Guillén (1902–89), who wrote black poetry, along with other poets in the region such as Jacques Roumain (1907–44) in Haiti, Langston Hughes (1902–67) in the United States, or Candelario Obeso (1849–84), the precursor to all of them, in Colombia.

The Afro-Cuban movement particularly manifested in the art-song genre that combined poetic and musical language. Composers such as Amadeo Roldán (1900–39) and Alejandro García Caturla (1906–40) set Guillén's poems to music, incorporating timbral and rhythmic elements of African origin, giving rise to song cycles such as Amadeo Roldán's "Motivos de son" or Caturla's "Dos canciones afrocubanas."

African influences have left a strong imprint on music even in countries where dominant narratives sought to whiten history, such as Argentina, where, around the time of independence, blacks constituted approximately 30% of the population of Buenos Aires. However, according to official statistics, this number had dropped to 2% by the late 19th century. According to Andrews, this decline was due to whitening policies that sought to Europeanize the country, aligning with prevalent scientific racism. Among many measures, individuals of African descent, mulattos, or trigueños were reclassified as whites in the official statistics (Andrews 2007: 70).

From then on, the myth of Argentina as a European nation located on the wrong continent spread, and race became a source of national pride—a form of expressing racial nationalism. This process, referred to by Solmianski as "discursive genocide" (Andrews 2007), reflects how 19th-century intellectuals resorted to Europeanization and constructing a supposedly homogeneous society in their desire to "civilize" the country. The rejection of the existence of Afro-Argentinians extended from society to music, denying any contribution. Only in the early 20th century, during the peak of the aforementioned Afro-philic movement, were attempts made to recover African influence in the origins of tango.

At that time, various writings, not without criticism and rejection, linked Candombe[16] and Milonga[17]—rhythms of African influence—to the origin of tango (Seyler 2008: 104–12). Recognized Afro-descendant musicians positioned themselves at the center of the tango world, including pianist Horacio Salgan, guitarist José Ricardo, and composer Guillermo Barbieri, who worked with the famous Carlos Gardel (Johns 2021: 318).

According to musicologist Eric Johns, the word "tango" was first used in 1786 to describe gatherings of Africans or Afro-descendants when the governor of Louisiana prohibited "tangos" or dances of Black people. Later, it appeared in Mexico in 1802 and in Montevideo in 1807, banning Afro-descendant dances. When the American tango arrived in Seville in the late 1830s, it became integrated into the "Cantes de ida y vuelta" and was appropriated by Spain. From that moment on, the Blackness or Africanness of tango is linked to a distant, primitive past that associates it with rhythm and percussion—a reductionist stereotype related to African music. (Johns 2021: 300) Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman write that "the racialization of music rarely stops with simple stereotypes supporting claims of difference. Indeed, by its very 'nature,' the ontological mapping of music onto race leads to stereotypes and prejudices" (Radano and Bohlman: 2000).

What happened with the origins of tango illustrates how whitening processes threaten to incorporate and mimic African cultural elements in dominant narratives to the point where they cease to be recognized, ending up doubly marginalized when they become mainstream.

The genre of song represents one of the most fascinating arenas in which to observe African influence in the music of the Americas. In Latin America, beyond art songs, a genre where we've shown significant African influence throughout history, there exists a vast repertoire of popular and folk songs characterized by African-influenced rhythms, shaping the identity of many countries today. Examples of these rhythms include salsa and bolero in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Colombia, son in Cuba, samba, bossa nova, maracatú, coco, and maxixe in Brazil, cumbia and reggaetón in Colombia, candombe in Uruguay, and tango in Argentina, among many others.

In fact, attempting to classify songs into traditional categories separating popular, folk, and classical songs is futile. These categories were artificially constructed from European centers of power in the 18th and 19th centuries to distinguish their musical productions from those of the rest of the world, segregating their music from that produced in the so-called peripheries, and elevating their cultural productions to a higher status.

Just as African influence pervaded all aspects of life and culture in the former American colonies, music was no exception. Songs from all strata of society bore its influence, whether in terms of rhythm, timbre, melody, or idiomatic elements. The survival of African musical elements undoubtedly represents a form of cultural resistance.

Motivated by nostalgia and the need to preserve their memory and identity, the African diaspora developed alternative resistance mechanisms, despite acculturation processes. Deprived of material possessions, they effectively utilized sound, language, and rituals to keep their culture alive. Over time, the intangible and symbolic creations they crafted permeated the societies in which they resided, sometimes becoming mainstream through a process of whitening that threatened to once again dispossess them of their symbolic wealth.

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[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzJjtCsJtXQ&t=96s

[17] https://youtu.be/NZVdfPUl250?si=rMxAC4cyhesQYzMs

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