Music and Identity in Venezuela

edited by **Adriana Ponce**

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Acknowledgments

Despite its tremendous wealth, Venezuelan music has remained largely unnoticed in academic scholarship in English. This volume is a contribution to what we hope will become a large and substantial body of literature on its many traditions and, as always, it would not have been possible without the help of many people. My thanks go to Jenny Stanford Publishing, first, for taking an interest in the subject. Similarly, my co-author in one of the essays, Irina Capriles, played an important role in the life of the book. Had it not been for the brainstorming sessions we held regarding another project on Venezuelan music, I am not sure I would have turned my attention to the topics in this collection. Naturally, the book owes its life, literally, to the wonderful colleagues who agreed to participate in it. Not only did they bring tremendous breadth, knowledge, and diversity of approaches to the table but, in the process, I often found among them a graciousness and generosity of spirit that is not easy to find. Juan Francisco Sans stands out among them—an extraordinary colleague, human being, and friend, who left us unexpectedly when we were approaching the final stage of the project. He will be greatly missed by many and, I am sure, I speak for all the authors in the volume when I say that he honors us and this volume with his presence.

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Adriana Ponce

Chapter 1

Music and Identity in Venezuela: An Introduction

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Music and Bonding

In his foundational work on nation formation, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson discussed the kind of bonding that takes place when a group of strangers comes together to sing a national anthem. He referred to the phenomenon as "unisonance" and described it as the "echoed physical realization of the imagined community."[1] Initially, he seemed to have located the tremendous bonding power of the experience in the very condition of simultaneity of the musical

[1]Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (rev. ed.) (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 145.

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utterances and maintained that it arose regardless of "how banal the words and mediocre the tune" were.[2] The experience in question is, naturally, one that many people can relate to. It is almost routinely illustrated when a group of strangers come together to sing not just a national anthem but also a religious hymn, a protest chant, and some other types of music. So strong is the effect in question, in fact, that one could even argue that establishing or exalting a sense of bonding is, at least partly, the *raison d'etre* of the music genres above.

The power of music to create bonding has also been entertained as an explanation of the role it has played, and continues to play, in almost all cultures around the world. All, or almost all, cultures have something that we would identify as music. And that "something" is often an important part of religious rituals, rites of passage celebrations, work, courting, and several other activities central to communal life.

For musicians, the experience of bonding over music-making is part of everyday life and is often a given in the work they do in various contexts. But the phenomenon in question has also occupied scholars from a variety of related disciplines, such as anthropology, music cognition, psychology, and neurology. Empirical disciplines have probably taken their cue about the power of music from life, art, social sciences, and the humanities and are typically concerned with explaining how exactly the bonding occurs. The empirical study of the relationship between music (or music-making) and cognitive and affective processes seems to be a relatively young field.[3] Although the briefest review of pertinent scholarship in any of the disciplines involved is well beyond the scope of this chapter, I will mention, by way of illustration, that the issue has been studied, for instance, in terms of the release of endorphins and a process of "self-other merging," under conditions involving interpersonal

[2]Ibid.

[3]By way of example, the Society for Music Perception and Cognition was founded in 1990; the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music in 1991, and its journal, *Musicae Scientiae*, began publication in 1997. *Psychology of Music* began publication in 1973; *Music Perception* began publication in 1983; *Empirical Musicology Review* was founded in 2004 and began publication in 2006; *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind and Brain,* a journal of the American Psychological Association, began publication in 1981.

synchrony.[4] If there is little consensus on the mechanisms through which collective music-making might create bonding, there is very strong consensus across disciplines and world views that it does.

But the power of music to nourish bonds and cultivate belonging and identity goes well beyond the phenomenon of simultaneity or "unisonance" and into its power to create symbolic and affective meanings. With its emotional baggage and poignant expressiveness, music has the potential to lend affective force to sentiments associated with certain kinds of narratives. If simultaneous singing can generate powerful connections in and of itself, the bonds that Anderson describes can be greatly enhanced by the music (and texts) being sung and by the contexts in which it occurs. Music derives a great deal of its expressive power from internal "technical" elements and from the social contexts within which it exists. Thus, genres that are expected to have distinct affective characters—such as anthems, religious chants, and protests songs—will typically use contrasting rhythmic durations that might mimic tension by requiring a very controlled use of energy, for instance; or they will use equally long, sustained durations to project evenness and peacefulness, as the case may require. By manipulating a number of other elements such as melody, harmony, timbre, register, dissonances, and repetitions, the composers creating music in these genres can also fulfill or thwart expectations; introduce swift changes in "direction;" build climaxes; interrupt processes; create a sense of precipitation; and build in highly charged or peaceful moments of silence as needed. As the discipline of music analysis attests, music can derive a tremendous amount of expressive, and even allegorical, meanings from our interpretation of internal "technical" characteristics and processes.

Context can also contribute significantly to music's affective and expressive meaning. Pieces that are commonly used in rituals and celebrations, in addition to reflecting the character of the celebration,

[4]Bronwyn Tarr, Jacques Launay, and Robin I. M. Dunbar, "Music and Social Bonding: 'Self-Other' Merging and Neurohormonal Mechanisms," *Frontiers in Psychology*, (Sept. 30, 2014). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01096. The author's reference to neurohormonal studies of bonding through music is based solely on this article by the Social and Evolutionary Neuroscience Research Group of the Experimental Psychology Department of the University of Oxford. The reference is intended as an illustration of the kind of work being done and a possible "point of entry" into the topic, for those who may be interested in empirical approaches to the issue.

often acquire further meaning from their association with it. Thus, familiarity with medieval church chants (or with other types of religious chants) would further imbue a given chant with a sense of peaceful solemnity—or perhaps pious devotion—depending on the meaning that the experience holds for the listener. Isolating the experience of the chant from its context would probably be as impracticable as separating music from Carnaval celebrations in the streets of Rio de Janeiro from the celebrations around it, for somebody who has sufficiently experienced the festivities. A similar phenomenon occurs when we listen to music from our youth, which momentarily reconnects us with a feeling or situation in our past. The expressive meaning of music is often charged with intended and non-intended elements from its social and cultural surroundings. And although music's capacity to awaken or reflect a sense of bonding is only "activated" with sound, one could also argue that its symbolic power sometimes grows outside of sound, through experiences of, say, suppression and oppression. Painful acts of political brutality and repression in a recent past, for instance, could render subsequent performances of a national anthem particularly charged with meaning for affected listeners.

It would seem, then, that the banality of text and the mediocrity of melody—or their opposites—run the risk of confusing the issue. Perhaps the more important aspect of music as a bonding experience—and as a manifestation of identity—is not its quality or degree of originality but rather the meaning it acquires through a number of internal and external elements. That is to say, the bonding or identity "value" of music seems a direct function of the way in which music "speaks" to the people involved—the degree to, or intensity with, which it lends affective force to a bonding experience and its underlying narrative.

But music's potential to create connections can also be effectively realized in situations that do not entail physical utterances on the part of a given individual or simultaneity of sounds of any kind. Toward the end of his very brief discussion on the topic, Anderson acknowledged that "unisonance" could also occur as the result of "listening to (and maybe even silently chiming with) the recitation of ceremonial poetry, such as the sections of the *Book of Prayer*" or even when others were singing out of earshot or in a place unknown to us. In situations like these, he concluded, "nothing connects us

all but imagined sound."[5] The argument that bonding can take place as the result of listening to music is entirely persuasive. Nobody who has been moved by music would want to argue that the effect of music is confined to the performer—not with respect to bonding or with respect to anything else. The feeling of bonding that we might derive when singing an anthem, a religious chant, or a protest song can envelop both performer and listener—provided that the listener is actively engaged in the act. But Anderson's attempt to "open up" his own argument runs into a bit of a problem, for he goes from locating "unisonance" on the act of simultaneity to claiming that the phenomenon also occurs through entirely imagined sound. And although the ability to imagine that sound is, arguably, a skill developed by the most accomplished musicians, I believe that is not what he had in mind. His argument seems to have shifted, rather, from the power of music to create bonding to the (very real) power of an idea to do the same. The difficulty he runs into is, I believe, the result of his over-privileging physical simultaneity, as the sense of bonding can also take place in its absence. As a matter of fact, the sense of bonding and belonging we have been discussing can also arise in private and even with respect to a group of people understood as an abstraction. Particularly important for the question of national identity is, in fact, that the sense of collectivity necessary for the feeling of belonging is often experienced in the immediate absence of other people. Much like music can "transport" us to the time when we were young or to a physical and affective context in which we experienced it in the past, it can also move us with respect to an abstract idea or collectivity. It can "transport" us to situations we did experience as members of a collectivity or arouse feelings central to the identity of that collectivity. Thus, it is not so much whether other performers (or listeners) are simultaneously engaged with the music. It is more whether other performers (or listeners) are willing, and in a position, to experience, accept, and embrace the bonding force of the music in any given situation. Simultaneity is just an additional—if very powerful—element. And, as a matter of fact, not only does it further connect performers through, for instance, the "blurring of the self and other" that is caused by the simultaneous

[5]Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 145.

performance of movement,[6] but I believe it also connects performers and listeners when, in the course of the music, they recognize their response—and hence their vulnerability—in each other.

Music as Window into Identity: The Case of Venezuela

As I hope to have persuasively argued, then, music has the power to generate bonding and meaning in a very large number of situations and manners, and through processes of physiological, psychological, and symbolic natures. It should come as no surprise, then, that it can so effectively—and so often—stand as a symbol of identity. In communities where it has a particularly strong presence, music provides a wonderful opportunity to explore some of the ways in which people have created, and continue to create, community; and in which they forge, protect, defend, project, and revise their identities. That is the case with Venezuela.

At the forefront of religious and secular celebrations and occupying center stage in everyday life, music has a strong identity-defining power in the country. That, together with the relatively short history of the nation, offers a wonderful opportunity to explore some of the many roles it may have played—and may continue to play—in the shaping of regional or ethnic identities, and the formation of national identity.

Venezuela entered the twentieth century as a relatively young independent nation-state marred by political and social conflict. The early decades found a society marked by *mestizaje*, divided by race and class, and with strong cultural and political loyalties at cross purposes, often under military dictatorship. With the discovery of oil in 1914, the country entered a period of progressive growth that would bring an unprecedented amount of wealth and usher in an attempted transformation from a multiplicity of rural and urban communities into a modern, partially industrialized nation-state. The first half of the twentieth century saw the publication of the first Venezuelan novels and, with them, the first literary attempts to

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[6]Katie Overy and Istvan Molnar-Szakacs, "Being Together in Time: Musical Experience and the Mirror Neuron System," *Music Perception*, **26** (5) (2009): 489–504. Doi: 10.1525/mp.2009.26.5.489.

narrate the nation. It also saw significant improvements in education, infrastructure, public health, and other areas, always within the framework of a society where a creole culture embraced "European" beliefs, values, social and political structures, and general way of life, while indigenous and black cultures fought to survive or, at best, remained marginalized. The largest oil reserves in the world and a tremendous abundance of valuable minerals and other riches also kept Venezuela within the sphere of influence of more powerful countries. Economic and cultural domination by the United States in the second half of the twentieth century deeply marked the way Venezuelans of various backgrounds saw, and continue to see, themselves. Sadly, the precarious journey from colonial rule to sovereignty, and from rural to a partially industrialized modern nation that peaked in the 1980s–1990s was then followed by a precipitous political, social, and economic collapse with *Chavismo,* which, despite its self-proclaimed socialist slant, dismantled all the achievements of socialized medicine and education of the previous decades of democracy. It also caused the uprooting of millions of Venezuelans, from all socioeconomic levels, during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.[7] Given the convulsed, short history of the nation-state and its inability to carve a space to develop relatively free of foreign influences for very long, it might not come as a surprise that discussions of identity in Venezuela be dominated by issues of national, regional, and ethnic identities. Given the connection between music and identity, it seems also natural that the former may have often been at the center of discussions about nationalism, foreign influence, lost heritage, cultural legacy, etc.

Boasting a tremendous wealth of styles and traditions that vary by region, occasion, socioeconomic level, and sometimes predominant ethnic group, Venezuelan music displays a wide array of influences from the Spanish, indigenous, and enslaved African communities that populated the territory through the "conquest" and colonial periods. Dominated, overall, by Spanish elements, it encompasses tremendous diversity, in which the various influences are manifested in different degrees, depending on the particular

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[7]Although Chávez has been dead for almost 20 years, reference to "Chavismo" at the time of writing this article reflects the belief that it was Chávez (and his inner circle) who put in place the military, political, and economic structures for the permanence in power of the regime he instituted, even at the hands of somebody else.

history of the region. Some traditions are markedly African in origin (e.g., celebrations of St. John Baptist in the central coastal region) whereas others are markedly European (e.g., the *valse* (waltz) from the Andes region). Others probably span the whole range of combinations. More common are perhaps traditions that offer complex mixtures. The Venezuelan national dance, for instance—the joropo—seems to have been derived from the Spanish fandango. But the latter appears to have originated, in turn, from an African sacro-magical dance in the Caribbean, which the Spaniards took to Andalusia during the "Conquest," greatly cultivated, and "brought back" in the eighteenth century.[8]

Likely, at some point along multiple transformations, it became the Venezuelan (and Colombian) joropo—a genre that also includes the most intricate rhythms played in an originally indigenous instrument, the maracas. Such a complex "genealogy" is by no means unique to the joropo. Most Venezuelan musical traditions might well resist a complete unraveling of influences. The fact remains that an incredibly rich, heterogenous, and ever-changing musical fabric arose—attached to the country's daily life, landscape, individual cultural practices, etc.—which owed much to the cultures in question. Naturally, subsequent influences from other places further diversified it. Immigration from the English-speaking Caribbean, for instance, resulted in the development of calypso—a traditional music genre that uses a sort of English- and Spanish-based "patois," which is cultivated in the south of the country. And influences from a number of Spanish-speaking islands in the Caribbean resulted in the dissemination and popularization of genres such as the *bolero*. The picture grows in complexity when we consider the place of "salsa" in the cultural identity of the country, for instance, for while no Venezuelan would claim their country as its place of birth (or the place of birth of the bolero, for that matter), most of them would claim both genres as "theirs"—although not only "theirs."

At the same time, the European legacy preserved by the predominantly white creole class—which led the movement of independence and thus secured its political, economic, and cultural power—continued to shape the country in important ways. The tradition of European "classical" or "concert" music was

[8]Katrin Lengwinat, S.V. "Joropo" in *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music in the World*, vol. 9, eds. David Horn and John Shepherd (London and New York, 2014).

progressively transplanted to the young country, beginning in the colonial period, through the church, salon, and opera theaters. The twentieth century then saw an attempt to consolidate the tradition in Venezuelan soil through, among other things, institutions of musical education where composers explored the possibility of creating a "national" school within the "classical" tradition. And although those specific efforts were relatively short lived, almost a century later, one of the greatest conductors alive, Simon Rattle, would go on record saying: "if anybody asked me where is there something really important going on for the future of classical music, I would simply have to say, here, in Venezuela."[9]

But whereas traditional music is often incorporated into, and play a prominent role in, the narration of national identity, classical music usually enters the conversation in a significantly different way. In general terms, Venezuelans from many backgrounds recognize and respond to the quasi-emblematic power of a *joropo* or a *tonada* from the Plains, a *merengue* from Caracas, a *fulía* or *tambores* from the coastal areas, a *calypso* from the south, an *aguinaldo* from a number of regions, a *gaita* from Maracaibo, a *polo* from Margarita Island and of a number of other traditional music from various regions. Similarly, they might recognize the System of Venezuela Youth Orchestras and their performances as "theirs," i.e., as part of their communal identity. But in the country, as in many other places outside of Western Europe, notions of identity—and especially national identity—typically encounter the tradition of "classical" music in the context of a very different dynamic where "influence" flows in the opposite direction. Rather than subsuming specific works or styles of "classical" music into the act of narrating community, Venezuelan composers of "art" music have historically sought to write "concert" music in the European tradition with (or without) a distinct Venezuelan "touch." The question, at least at this point, becomes not one of subsuming "classical" music into their shared identity, but of inserting their selves—i.e., of imprinting their "Venezuelanness"—into a centuries-long tradition that exists largely without. The complexity of the issue is very much connected to the development of what Carrera Damas termed the "creole consciousness." In his view, the creole consciousness—central to

[9]See "Tocar y luchar" ("To Play and to Fight"), a film directed by Alberto Arvelo on the Venezuelan System of Youth Orchestras (2006). For Rattle's quote see around 24'14."

the civilizations "implanted" in Latin America—was (and perhaps it still is) trapped within "structural limitations that affect the creation of its culture by the dual acceptance-rejection relationship it exists in, with respect to indigenous societies and the European-Anglo-American context."[10]

Mestizaje, Syncretism, and Other Foundational Myths

A discussion of music in connection with identity in Venezuela would greatly benefit from a preliminary consideration of some important issues underpinning the larger question of national identity. Perhaps the most important among them are *mestizaje*, religious syncretism, and *lo llanero* as a synecdoche for *lo venezolano*.[11]

Mestizaje is perhaps the single most important framework for the discussion of cultural identity (and music) in much of Latin America. The crossbreeding of ethnic groups and cultures, known as *mestizaje*, had different characteristics in different places in Latin America. In Venezuela, it is one of the most important foundational myths and refers to the mixture of Spanish, indigenous, and enslaved African populations and their cultures in what is considered a gestational period of sorts for the country, i.e., from the arrival of the European "conquerors." The very conception of a gestational period beginning with the arrival of the Spanish conqueror is, of course, no accident and points to the foundational role of the same in the mainstream historical narratives and, more indirectly, to the tremendous imbalance of power between the local communities, the European newcomers, and the enslaved people they brought from Africa. Despite its implicit and very valid claim to diversity and multiculturalism, *mestizaje* did not take place between peoples and cultures on equal footing. It took place under the watch and control of the Spanish conqueror, whose arrival endangered the cultures and the very existence of indigenous communities.

In Venezuela, only the Spaniards were able to preserve a sense of cultural continuity. The indigenous populations saw their culture and their very existence under threat. The cultures of the enslaved

[10]Germán Carrera Damas, *El dominador cautivo: Ensayos sobre la configuración cultural del criollo venezolano* (Caracas: Grijalbo, 1988), 2–3.

[11]*Lo llanero* is an abstract noun that denotes anything and everything from the Plains; *lo venezolano*, anything and everything Venezuelan.

African populations had perhaps only slightly better luck as some cultural manifestations of African origin remained relatively "whole" and made it into the "mestizo" culture. But isolated as they were, enslaved, and transplanted from a number of far-away places, these communities were not in a position to prevail in shaping the culture of the country. It is perhaps testimony to their resilience and cultural wealth that indigenous and enslaved communities preserved enough of their cultures, to counter the Spanish one and force it to re-formulate itself through *mestizaje*. Naturally, their cultures themselves were also re-formulated by it.

Mestizaje, then, has a problematic and complex history that we can hardly attempt to elucidate in any thorough way here.[12] The mixture of races and cultures occurred, certainly at first, through tremendous violence and profound power inequality. And it took place at the expense of the historical continuity of the various indigenous and Afro-descendant groups in the country and their cultures. Added to this, the early history of the term shows an ugly tension—at best—between its usage as a way for the white creole to distinguish himself from the colonizer Spaniard, and its usage as a way to "whiten" the purely indigenous and the purely black elements in the country's population and culture.[13] Explicit calls for miscegenation as a way to "dilute" the "purely" black can be found by a significant number of Venezuelan public figures well into the twentieth century. The famous *café con leche* metaphor of the Venezuelan poet Andrés Eloy Blanco (1944) as a "solution" to the "black problem" in the United States stands as a well-known example.[14] But even as late as 1974, Guillermo Morón, a notable Venezuelan historian, wrote:

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[12]For a more comprehensive view of the topic, the reader is invited to consult, for instance, Arturo Uslar Pietri, *La invención de América mestiza*, compiled and presented by Gustavo Luis Carrera (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996); Manuel Hernández "Raza, inmigración e identidad nacional en la Venezuela finisecular," *Contrastes*, no. 9–10 (1994–1996): 38–40; Damas *El dominador cautivo*; Winthrop Wright, *Café con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Miguel Acosta Saignes, *Estudios para la formación de nuestra identidad* (Caracas, Venezuela: Funadación Editorial El El Perro y La Rana, 2017); Peter Wade, "Rethinking Mestizaje: Ideology and Lived Experience," *Journal of Latin American Studies* **37** (2005), 239–257; and José Antonio Kelly Luciani, *About Anti-mestizaje* (Desterro, Brazil: Cultura e Barbárie, 2016).

[13]For an overall view on the issue, see, for instance, Kelly Luciani, *About Anti-mestizaje.* See also Chapter 5 in this volume, Jessie D. Dixon's "To the Beat of African Drums: Afro-Venezuelan Music and Identity Through Betsayda Machado and La Parranda El Clavo.

[14]Wright, *Café con leche.*

> Should the indigenous communities be preserved? This cannot be desired by anybody. Communities are destined to slowly disappear .... We must hope that in the near future ... there will remain not a single group speaking Carib or another aboriginal language ....
>
> The Indian is part of our history as a composing factor of *mestizaje*; in this way it accomplished a purpose that no one can deny him. But it is necessary to assimilate him altogether, integrate him to our own way of understanding culture. *Mestizaje* is the historical means for this incorporation.[15]

Perhaps not surprisingly Latin America's *mestizaje* has not managed to rid itself, in Anglo-Saxon academic circles, of the racist ideology of "whitening" that often lay behind it. Subscribing to this understanding, Antonio Cornejo Polar has offered cautionary words:

> The concept of *mestizaje*, despite its prestigious tradition, is a concept that falsifies the condition of our culture and our literature in the most drastic way. In effect what *mestizaje* does is to offer a harmonious image of what is obviously disjointed and confrontational, proposing representations that deep down are only relevant to those for whom it is convenient to imagine our societies as smooth and non-conflictive spaces of coexistence.[16]

Indeed, as Peter Wade has remarked, the understanding of the term that has dominated the academic debate in the States "has tended to privilege two assumptions: first that nationalist ideologies of *mestizaje* are basically about the creation of a homogeneous *mestizo* (mixed) future ... and second, that *mestizaje* as a nationalist ideology appears to be an inclusive process ... but in reality, it is exclusive because it marginalizes blackness and indigenousness, while valuing whiteness."[17]

In his research on Colombian music and his examination of Barbara Placido's study of the Venezuelan cult of María Lionza, Wade has proposed, however, that the assumptions above are an oversimplification. And he has argued for a distinction between

[15]Guillermo Morón, *Historia de Venezuela* (Caracas: Italgráfica, 1974), 16, as cited in José Antonio Kelly Luciani, *About Anti-mestizaje*, 27.

[16]Antonio Cornejo Polar, "Mestizaje and Hybridity: The Risks of Metaphors—Notes," in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Ana del Sarto, Alicia Ríos, and Abril Trigo (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 760–761.

[17]Wade, "Rethinking Mestizaje," 240.

mestizaje as ("whitening," homogenizing) ideology and *mestizaje* "as lived"—i.e., *mestizaje* as it "filters" in and out of everyday cultural manifestations and attitudes nowadays. And he has rightly concluded that "*mestizaje* is lived physically through a tension between sameness and difference,"[18] that is to say, *mestizaje*, as he sees it reflected in live culture, allows for the simultaneous coexistence of elements that are distinct to each one of the constituent cultures and for a sense of unity among them. He claims that in acknowledging and performing the African and indigenous elements in many of their traditions, "the literate classes are recreating the very things that are supposed to disappear in the process of the *mestizaje* they are celebrating. Mestizo-ness is not simply opposed to blackness and indigenousness; rather, blackness and indigenousness are actively reconstructed by mestizo-ness."[19] As I would argue, so is whiteness.

Although *mestizaje* has different faces in different countries in Latin America, the understanding above is very much aligned with the current view of the phenomenon in Venezuela, certainly among writers and intellectuals.

> It is on the basis of this fertile and powerful *mestizaje* that one can affirm the personality of Hispanic America, its ingenuity, and its creative charge. With everything received from past and present, Hispanic America can formulate a new time, a new direction, and a new language for the expression of man. And it can do this without tampering with the most valuable and consistent elements of its collective being, which is its capacity for a lively and creative *mestizaje*.[20]

Peter Wade's "*mestizaje* as lived process" is particularly compelling and seems to capture the phenomenon in all of its complexity, without denying the very real forces of tension within it.

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[18]Ibid., 250.

[19]Ibid., 245.

[20]"Es sobre la base de este mestizaje fecundo y poderoso donde puede afirmarse la personalidad de la América hispana, su originalidad y su tarea creadora. Con todo lo que llega del pasado y del presente, puede la América hispana definer un nuevo tiempo, un nuevo rumbo y un nuevo lenguaje para la expression del hombre, sin forzar ni adulterar lo más constante y valioso de su ser colectivo, que es su aptitud para el mestizaje viviente y creador." Arturo Uslar Pietri, "El mestizaje y el nuevo mundo" in *La invención de América mestiza*, compiled and presented by Gustavo Luis Carrera (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), 261.

> All this leads us to a view of *mestizaje* which is rather different from the usual image of the nationalist processes striving to create a homogeneous identity that eventually erases blackness and indigenousness in order to end up with a whitened *mestizo* .... It leads to the image of *mestizaje* as the construction of a mosaic, which can be embodied in a single person or within a complex of religious practices as well as within the nation."[21]

Particularly important is also the fact that his understanding does not negate, in any way, the tremendous inequality among the constitutive cultures.

> The difference between ideas of mixture as seen from above and below in the racial hierarchy is not the difference between seeing it as a fusion and as a mosaic, but rather the role played by the hierarchy and power in the ordering of the elements of the mosaic. Blackness and indigenousness can still be subjected to hierarchical orderings in which they are made to occupy inferior locations and are discriminated against and/or rendered exotic. If the idea of the mosaic implies that there are spaces for blackness and indigenousness ... it is important to recognize that these spaces remain subject to the hierarchies of power and value inherent both in traditional ideologies of "whitening."

Traditional music in Venezuela certainly bears the understanding of mestizaje that Wade proposed. As noted before, different musical traditions are clearly embedded in various cultures to different degrees. And almost any discussion on the topic will immediately reveal awareness of the various origins of their most typical instruments—i.e., the European origin of the *cuatro* and creole harp; the indigenous origin of the *maracas*; and the African origin of a large number of drums used across the country. The same is true of certain genres of music and musical traditions. Discussions of the celebrations of the Feast of Saint John the Baptist will immediately refer, unequivocally, to the fact that both music and dancing are profoundly steeped in African traditions. So are the music and dancing that take place in small towns in the central coast—e.g., Choroní—where people from Caracas go on holidays. There, the local population gathers to play drums and dance by the beach or in public squares while visitors of all racial backgrounds (and socioeconomic

[21]Wade, 252.

levels) attend the celebration and sometimes join in the dancing.[22] All those present recognize the fact that the tradition is unique to that area, where a large number of Afro-descendants live, and that the music and dancing are of pronounced African origin. And while no outsider can really play drums like the locals who have been doing it since childhood, Venezuelans from all backgrounds still learn the dance and join in the celebration.

The second issue mentioned above, which is central to any discussion of identity in Venezuela, is what we are loosely referring to as **religious syncretism**. The phenomenon is connected to *mestizaje* and points to the mixture of elements from Catholicism—brought by Spanish missionaries—and elements from local religions and/or secular celebrations. Converting the indigenous population was an important goal of the so-called "conquest" in Venezuela and Latin America. But in the process of converting the indigenous and, subsequently, the enslaved populations, the Catholic Church had to make significant "concessions" to the new converts in terms of the way they celebrated, prayed, and adored the Christian God (and other related figures, such as saints and the Virgin). While the big city churches soon developed a musical language similar to that of sixteenth-century European sacred music, many of the celebrations in the countryside and small towns also developed in directions significantly different from those of its European counterparts. Secular and sacred elements were often mixed, and many of the religious celebrations developed their own music and rituals. Sometimes they even developed a "narrative" of their own. From Christmas until February 2nd—which marks the "Feast of the Presentation of Jesus Christ" and the "Feast of the Purification of The Virgin"—a special celebration takes place in the Venezuelan Andes region. It is called the "Paradura del Niño," ("Standing of the Child"). In it, people gather in a home to celebrate the Child Jesus and a person, who is selected beforehand, steals the figure of baby Jesus from the home's nativity scene, unnoticed by everyone else. Once somebody notices that the Child is missing, the entire town goes out to look for him from house to house until they find him. The celebration continues with the Child Jesus who is still taken to a number of other houses where they sing for him and ask him

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[22]See, for instance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BeRNQ2CUycE. (Go to minute 3 for dancing.)

to bless their homes. Oftentimes the music performed in these *sui generis* Catholic celebrations features drums and other instruments of indigenous and/or African origin, and sometimes it even includes public dancing. Such is the case with the celebrations of "*Corpus Christi*," for instance, which in some areas incorporate street dancing and masked devils. The celebrations of St. John Baptist in the central coastal area also include music of African origin solely played on drums. The celebration of the "Holiest May Cross" or the "Wake of the Cross"—which takes place across much of the country beginning May 3rd—combines the exaltation of the Cross with celebrations of fertility, the harvest, and the rainy season, which preceded the arrival of the Spaniards. During this celebration, people build a cross made of flowers and pray, sing, and recite improvised poetry to the cross in front of it. The feast also often includes the placing of fruits and sometimes of saints around the cross.[23] The *Tamunangue*—Lara state's unique celebration of St. Anthony of Padua—is yet another religious celebration that entails elaborate dance choreographies and *fulías*—a term already present in sixteenth-century Spanish music—with African and indigenous elements.

The last foundational myth that I will briefly consider here relates to the long history of ***lo llanero***'s standing for ***lo venezolano***. Much has been written on the subject. And the phenomenon is as complex as it is clear for all to see.[24] It is no accident that the *joropo* (the typical dance celebration of the region); the *liqui-liqui* (the garment used by men from the area); and the *cuatro*, the creole harp, and the maracas (the most common instruments in the region) are also official national symbols.

[23]For a discussion on a variety of encounters between European and local music during the Conquest, see *A tres bandas: Mestizaje, sincretismo e hibridación en el espacio sonoro Iberoamericano*, Tercer Congreso Iberoamericano de Cultura. Medellín-Colombia, 2010 (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior and Ediciones Akal S.A., 2010).

[24]See, for instance, Clément Thibaud, "De la ficción al mito: Los llaneros de la independencia de Venezuela," in *Mitos politicos en las sociedades andinas: orígenes, invenciones, funciones*," ed. Germán Carrera Damas, Carole Leal Curiel, Georges Lomné and Frédéric Martínez (Caracas: Insitut français d'études andines, 2006) DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifea.5213; Ernesto Mora Queipo, Jean González Queipo and Dinora Richrad de Mora, "El centauro llanero: Sus mitosy símbolo en la identidad venezolana," *Opción* **23** (53) (2007); Horacio Biord Castillo, "Reflexiones sobre identidad nacional en tiempos de gobalización y particularización: Hipótesis sobre el caso venezolano," *Anuario Grhial* (8) (January–December 2014); 189–222.

As Clément Thibaud's in-depth discussion on the subject has shown, the image that so often stands for everything Venezuelan entails qualities that can be seen as positive and negative. I would suggest, however, that they are both embraced by people, at times, with equal pride.

> The *llanero* is, then, a metonymy for the Venezuelan Nation in its first contradiction: champion of the egalitarian republic and rebel against the civilizing process of the liberal utopia.[25]
>
> Much like the unknown soldier of egalitarian democracies, the llanero embodies the innate virtues of the anonymous people, its spontaneous wisdom, and a vigor that sometimes overflows in cruel excesses. These turmoils are never a sign of a vicious or depraved spirit; they are, rather, the effect of an abundance of strength. Vivid weapon of the Independence, it is also the people and its hypostasis in populace, sovereign and common throng at once.[26]

The reasons for the synecdoche (or metonymy), however, are considerably less obvious. Among many possible explanations, the role of the *llaneros* in the War of Independence seems an important one. The prevailing historical narrative tells us of the prominent role that the *llaneros* played in the Wars of Independence. They fought in large numbers and difficult campaigns under Bolívar and under the command of one of the most important independence heroes, José Antonio Páez—a man from the Plains himself. But their courage and bravery are also acknowledged in the troops that fought under the command of a fierce leader of the Colonial government, José Tomás Boves, who lived among them. Both leaders achieved quasi-mythological status.[27] In the popular imagination, the *llanero* stands for bravery, attachment to the land, and tremendous wit—conditions

[25]"El llanero es entonces una metonimia de la nación venezolana en su primera contradicción: a la vez paladín de la república igualitaria y rebelde contra el proceso civilizador de la utopía liberal." Thibaud, "De la ficción al mito."

[26]"A imagen del soldado desconocido de las democracias igualitarias, el llanero encarna las virtudes innatas del pueblo anónimo, su sabiduría espontánea y un vigor que se desborda a veces en crueles excesos. Estos desórdenes jamás son prueba de un espíritu vicioso o depravado, sino más bien efecto de una abundancia de fuerza. Arma viva de la Independencia, también es el pueblo y su hipóstasis en populacho, a la vez soberano y vulgar turba." Thibaud, "De la ficción al mito."

[27]Reflecting their quasi-mythological image, they have been inscribed in Venezuelan history as "Paéz, el centauro de los llanos" and "Boves, el urogallo," respectively ("Páez, the Centaurus From the Plains" and "Boves, the Grouse").

that allowed the creole to distance himself from the Spaniard and that are still important cultural attributes. And he shows awareness of his identity and values.

zumba que zumba, nació cuando la conquista	*zumba* que *zumba*, was born during the "Conquest"
y es una mezcla del indio y del español,	and is a mixture of the Indian and the Spaniard,
es sangre de nuestra sangre por eso la canto yo.	it is blood of our blood and that is why I sing it.
De catiras no me hables	Of blondes, don't talk to me
yo tuve cuatro docenas	I had four dozens
y de las cuarenta y ocho	and out of the forty-eight
ninguna me salió buena.[27]	not a single one was any good.

The figure of the *llanero* as a symbol of "Venezuelanness" also owes a great deal to the literature of Rómulo Gallegos (1884–1969) from the first half of the twentieth century. A prominent writer and intellectual who also served briefly as President (1948), Gallegos has long been considered a "literary father" of sorts for the nation.[29] His work was compulsory reading in schools at least for the second half of the twentieth century (and probably beyond that). His most celebrated novel, Doña Bárbara, takes place in the Plains and revolves around a strong, harsh female figure—the product of a violent, difficult upbringing in the Plains—and the son of another rancher who, after receiving a college education in Caracas, returns to the Plains to take charge of his father's lands. The novel is widely regarded as an allegory of the conflict between "civilization" and

[28]Sonia García, "Diversas claves del joropo," in *Estudios en torno al joropo* (Caracas, Fundación Vicente Emilio Sojo, 2009), 51–59

[29]See, for instance, Mónica Marinone, *Rómulo Gallegos: Imaginario de nación*, Serie Universidad y Pensamiento (Mérida, Venezuela: Ediciones El Otro mismo, 2006); Jenni M. Lehtinen, *Narrative and National Allegory in Rómulo Gallegos's Venezuela*, MHRA Texts and Dissertations 88 (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2013; Javier Lasarte Varcárcel, "Mestizaje y populismo en *Doña Bárbara*: De Sarmiento a Martí," *Iberoamericana (1977–2000)*, **24**, no. 2–3 (78–79) (2000):164–186; Julie Skurski, "The Ambiguities of Authenticity in Latin America: Doña Bárbara and the Construction of National Identity," *Poetics Today* **15** (4) (Winter 1994); José Castro Urioste, "Utopía y transgresión: El imaginario nacional en la obra de Rómulo Gallegos," *Hispanic Journal*, **17**(2) (Fall 1996): 329–344.

"barbarity" that was at the core of the emerging nation. "Barbarity"—in the sense of feral, untamed—is explicitly represented by the name character in the novel. But it is also understood to represent the old "Venezuela," fragmented into rural communities and particularly vulnerable to the phenomenon of "caudillismo."[30] That the two "worlds" struggling to deliver the nation were located in the Plains places the region in a prominent position within the national imaginary. In the words of Juan Liscano, "it befell Gallegos to write the golden legend of something that left us. His words ... killed the Plains so that they could be reborn into a new life: that of fable and myth."[31]

Florentino as Archetype

But there is another novel by Gallegos, less often discussed, that is of particular importance to our discussion here. *Cantaclaro* offers another story that unfolds in the Plains and paints a vivid picture of its landscape, people, and way of life.[32] Its main character, "Florentino," is a *llanero* who embodies all the virtues and vices that, as Thibaud noted above, come often together to depict the *llanero* archetype. Florentino is referred to as *catire*—an affectionate moniker that can be translated as blonde but might mean he is of very light complexion. He is handsome—"*bien plantao*"—charming, unable to settle down or even remain in a place for very long, an irresistible womanizer, a great storyteller, and perhaps closely related to that, a formidable liar. Even the negative attributes are regarded with sympathy—sometimes admiration—for they are understood as the result of unbounded wit, ingenuity, and shrewdness. Florentino is also an extraordinary musician; he sings,

[30]Lehtinen, *Narrative and National Allegory*, 4–7. The term *caudillo* refers to a political/military figure who rises on his personal merits, outside of an organized political system, and holds tremendous power without accountability. *Caudillismo* refers to a political system largely based on these figures, which dominated the Venezuelan political arena since the time of independence into the twentieth century (and whose effects, some would argue, still linger today).

[31]"Correspondió a Gallegos escribir la leyenda dorada de algo que se fue. Sus palabras ... mataron al llano para que resucitara a otra vida: la de la fábula, el mito." Juan Liscano, *Rómulo Gallegos y su tiempo*, 2nd ed. (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1980), 141.

[32]Rómulo Gallegos, *Cantaclaro*, 10th ed. (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Espasa-Calpe, 1972)

plays maracas, and is known as the "oriole" of the Arauca (the region). More importantly, he has no equal at an improvisatory music practice typical of the Plains known as *contrapunteo*. As it will become progressively clearer in the course of this volume, music is a central element in life in the Plains. It accompanies the work of the *llanero* and is at the center of social occasions and dances. In gatherings, it often takes the form of a *contrapunteo*—a "duel" of sorts where two singers alternatively improvise music and text (within specific metric and rhyme constraints) in which each one of them has to improvise a new stanza, beginning with the last line of his contender's last verse. In the process of improvising, they often refer to, and challenge, each other; exalt the praises of a beautiful woman present; or refer to known events or each other's skills in other areas of life, etc. This common form of entertainment is, then, also an important opportunity for singers to show their talent and wit. *Contrapunteos* often finish when one of the singers gives up and concedes superiority of wit to his contender.

Thus, Florentino, the archetype of the *llanero* in so many other ways in *Cantaclaro*, is also the best at *contrapunteo*. But the character was not entirely created by Gallegos. He based it on a local legend of a *llanero* whom no man dared measure himself against. Florentino was, in fact, such a skilled musician—both in legend and novel—that he entered a *contrapunteo* with the only possible contender, the Devil. And the novel ends with a rumor, "Florentino was taken away by the Devil!" An important part of *llanero*—and Venezuelan—folklore, the legend of Florentino was also a source of inspiration for the poet Alberto Arvelo Torrealba (1905–71), who wrote a poem titled "Florentino y el Diablo," and for the composer Antonio Estévez (1916–88), who set the poem in question to music in his *Cantata Criolla* (*Creole Cantata*).

Although the connection between Gallegos' narration of the nation and his work was previously made explicit only in connection with *Doña Bárbara*, his entire *oeuvre* has been looked at in that light. "The dimensions of Gallegos' project ... makes his texts unavoidable examples and guides the interrogation, more than any other example, toward the founding gesture of a nation from literature."[33] It seems, then, particularly significant that a novel fully embedded

[33]"La dimension del proyecto de Gallegos ... hace de sus textos instancias ineludibles y orienta la interrogación, más que cualquier otro caso, hacia el gesto fundante de una nación moderna desde la literatura." Marinone, *Rómulo Gallegos*, 16.

in a project of narrating the nation should forge an archetype of the individual member of the nation as a musician of skill and wit only comparable to those of the Devil. From this point of view, the central roles of music and the *llanero* in the national imaginary supplement each other in wonderful ways in the novel.

National Identity and Its Pitfalls

One additional point seems necessary to address in connection with this brief exploration of music and identity in Venezuela. As we all know, identity is a very complex, multi-faceted issue. And the question of national—or regional—identity is almost infinitely more so. But it also plays a very important role in who we are, especially when understood as a function of cultural identity, as in the present case. Thus, the collection of chapters that this preliminary exploration introduces is concerned with some of the ways in which music and, by and large, culture have shaped, and continue to shape, a sense of identity in communities of various levels of social and political organization in Venezuela. Some chapters deal with questions of identity in relatively small communities. Others deal with cultural manifestations and issues that find their way into the larger composite of national identity. Obviously, in no case, should the chapters be understood to portray a monolithic sense of identity uniformly by every member of a community regardless of status, social class, race, gender, background, etc. The understanding of national—or regional—identity that the present volume subscribes to is not one in which a set of given elements would define anyone—let alone all members of the nation—in their totality. As an abstract construct outside of the individual, the understanding of national or regional identity that comes to mind is a sort of unstable three-dimensional mosaic with myriad movable tiles that are significant enough to enter the individual sense of identity of community members in various degrees and combinations. As an element of an individual's identity, the mosaic is constituted by a number of selected tiles in an array appropriate to the individual, which necessarily interact in various ways with identity-defining elements in other realms. In both cases, one cannot help but imagine a sort of "cubist" construct capable of containing mutually exclusive perspectives and experiences at the same time. For, at least in the case of Venezuela,

conceiving a monolithic national identity seems as problematic as denying the existence of cultural symbols that generate belonging for vast segments of the population at a time, across a significant part of the country.

The chapters in this collection, then, explore small, individual areas in those incommensurable abstractions of national, regional, and ethnic identities in Venezuela.

"Simón Díaz and the '*Tonada llanera*': The forging of a referent for modern Venezuelan identity," by Adriana Ponce and Irina Capriles, is a study of the *Tonada*—a genre that has been emblematic of Venezuelan identity for the last four decades or so. It traces the development of the *tonada* from its origins in milking and herding songs from the Plains and proposes an understanding of the genre based on the work of Simón Díaz. It also examines the circumstances that allowed the genre to become a symbol of "Venezuelanness." "Relocating the nativity in celebration and song," by Adriana Ponce, is a study of a group of *aguinaldos*—a type of Venezuelan Christmas music—that relocate the "nativity" in a variety of Venezuelan contexts. The relocation in question is considered in the context of Christmas celebrations that typically entail traditions—performative and otherwise—in which people actively engage with biblical figures and, in particular, with the Child Jesus. More than the overly nationalistic appropriation of the "nativity" that the listener could initially take the phenomenon for, the latter is presented as an extension, in song, of other celebrations. It argues for the relocations as acts of playfulness and intimacy, and of cultural resistance and appropriation in various ways. "Corpus Christi reinterpreted: Power dynamics and African diaspora in Venezuela's Dancing Devils," by Alexandra Siso, examines Corpus Christi celebrations at various historical periods in Spain, the colonial Americas, and the north-central region of Venezuela, with particular attention to the representation of evil, its political contexts, and the power of the Catholic Church. It also examines various performative and costume-related elements in the celebration in Venezuela in connection with specific traditions from West and Central Africa. The widely accepted narrative of religious syncretism in Venezuela takes a special twist in her discussion when she shows that the Dancing Devils associated with the cultures of the enslaved population represented "evil" in the festivities and, at the same time, had the power to "validate" the paying of promises by the general population.

Jessie-Dixon-Montgomery's chapter, "To the beat of African drums: Afro-Venezuelan music and identity through Betsayda Machado and La Parranda El Clavo," is a study of *parrandas*—a musical genre from north-central Venezuela, where enslaved Africans were brought in large numbers to work in cocoa plantations. The chapter examines musical, textual, and performative characteristics of the genre, as performed by Betsayda Machado and the El Clavo Parranda, and traces them to cultural elements and beliefs from Africa. At the center of Dixon-Montgomery's argument is a compelling understanding of the parranda as a strong reaffirmation of African cultural heritage and a counter-discourse to an understanding of "mestizaje" that promotes "whitening" disguised as cultural uniformity. Katrin Lengwinat and Juan Daniel Porrello's "Indigenous Identitary Resistance in 20th/21st-Century Venezuela: Pumé and Wayuu Musical Cultures" considers the question of cultural resistance among indigenous communities in Venezuela. Juan Daniel Porrello examines an important musical tradition of the Pumé and compares it with the form that the tradition in question took in the Pumé community of Las Piedras—a community that identifies itself nowadays as Christian. He makes a very persuasive case for an understanding of their changed practice as a unique way of worship that is firmly grounded in their tradition. Katrin Lengwinat explores the efforts of the Wayuu communities in western Venezuela to hold onto their musical traditions, in the face of the processes of marginalization and Westernization that they have faced for centuries and of the most recent cultural threat—i.e., a very popular musical genre from neighboring Colombia, the vallenato. She discusses the emergence of Wayuu Cultural Festivals as an effort to preserve their traditions and examines the effects of re-semantization that they have had, in turn, on the music they have sought to preserve. Mariantonia Palacios and Juan Francisco Sans's "Patriotic 'Glosses': Generic mutations, appropriation, and identity in the Venezuelan national anthem" leaves the realm of traditional music to trace the history of the Venezuelan national anthem. Documenting (and bypassing) the question of authorship—around which all previous research has centered—they trace the history of the piece as a national symbol; the official contexts to which it was legally restricted; and a more recent phenomenon whereby the song has been used in contexts that would have been considered downright illegal and disrespectful before. They look at the "transformations" that the piece has

undergone, through the lens of Juan Pablo González's idea of "liquid performativity," and maintain that most of these transformations have effectively changed the genre of the piece. They also consider the transformations in question in connection with the political situation of the country in the last couple of decades.

The remaining chapters in the volume deal with music belonging to the tradition of "art" or "concert" music ("classical music"). They explore the place of classical music in the Venezuelan context in reference to historiography, currents of nationalism, and notions of appropriation, colonialism, resistance, the forging of official icons, and modernism. "Intellectual though behind Venezuelan musical nationalism: Ideas, values and beliefs," by Miguel Astor, begins with a detailed examination of nationalism as a political ideology in twentieth-century Venezuela and of the role it sought to fulfill with respect to nation formation and modernization. He then proposes a view of the so-called nationalistic school of music in Caracas as embedded within that larger ideological frame and maintains that such an understanding sheds light on the position it held in connection with European avant-garde music movements. Interestingly enough, he contrasts the latter with a very different situation within intellectual circles and the visual arts. In "A ten-year break? On a nationalist music historiography in Venezuela," Hugo Quintana M. chronicles the progressive establishment of opera productions and opera seasons in Venezuela between 1848 and 1858. Based on an automated database for musical news created by Raquel Campomás y Yureina Santana, he paints a wonderful picture of opera activity in Caracas in the mid-nineteenth century. More importantly, he places it in the context of historiographies of music in the city—especially as represented by Calcaño's *La Ciudad y su música*—which traditionally disregarded the genre because of their nationalistic agenda. In the process of restoring opera performance to its place in the history of music in the city, he offers compelling examples of ideological and conceptual biases in the construction of music histories. Laura Pita's "Teresa Carreño's repatriation and revival: Nationalism, feminism, and the historical imagination" is a very well-documented study of the process of "revival" of the great nineteenth-century Venezuelan pianist, Teresa Carreño. It traces the efforts of various personalities to re-establish a posthumous connection between Carreño and