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Source: *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (Winter, 2006), pp. 505-523
Published by: Oxford University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25172850
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Going Primitive to the Movements and Sounds of Mambo

David F. García

Around 1950 a new music and dance craze called the mambo caught the attention of musicians, dancers, journalists, filmmakers, intellectuals, and others throughout the Americas. Writing about the dance in a 1951 issue of *Dance Magazine*, American dance critics and teachers Don Byrnes and Alice Swanson stated, "It is now the responsibility of the teacher to standardize, discipline and properly present this thrilling dance to make it acceptable."[1] That same year *New York Daily News* journalist Jess Stearn published an article on mambo dancing as he had observed it being performed at the popular Palladium dance hall in midtown Manhattan; his article was titled "Touch of Jungle Madness: Denizens of Broadway Go Slightly Primitive under Spell of the Wild Sweaty Mambo."[2] A year earlier, in 1950, the Mexican film *Al son del mambo* [To the Sound of Mambo] premiered. Directed by Chano Urueta, this musical comedy featured a group of Mexican sojourners, including a composer, who travel to "primitive" or rural Cuba to escape their disillusionment with modern urban life. The composer aspires to harness the primal sounds of nature into a new kind of music, which he eventually creates in collaboration with "the king of the mambo" himself, Dámaso Pérez Prado. Finally, in contrast to Urueta's portrayal of mambo, the eminent Venezuelan psychiatrist Raúl Ramos Calles railed that the "mambo is no more or less a product of Yankee tourism that invades Cuba. . . . The mambo has no musical value."[3] Ramos Calles was one of many Latin American professionals, academics, and writers who rejected the mambo, considering it an insidious form of both black American vulgarity as well as North American cultural imperialism and, as such, a threat to the racial and cultural integrity of their nations.

In these various representations of the mambo, we can read three rhetorical devices that are commonly encountered in the interrelated discourses of evolutionism and primitivism of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first device, characteristic of social and cultural evolutionary thought of the nineteenth century, is the positing

doi:10.1093/musqtl/gdm006 89:505–523
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of a "lack" of organization, discipline, and refinement in the music and dance. The fact that Latin dancers executed a variety of steps and privileged individual dance styles over standardized approaches to dancing seemed to frustrate professional dance teachers like Don Byrnes and Alice Swanson, who were non-Latin and wanted to teach or codify the next big dance fad. Cuban intellectuals similarly criticized mambo dancing for its "lack" of refinement as well as its eschewing of "appropriate" modes of comportment. The second device—founded in biological as well as social and cultural evolutionary discourses of the nineteenth century—is the othering of mambo music and dance racially, spatially, and temporally. It is particularly curious that many Latin American writers and intellectuals characterized this dance and musical form as a product of black American popular cultural forms, as well as of U.S. cultural imperialism. The third device, which distinguished the predominant conception of primitivism in the early twentieth century from its antecedents, is the framing of mambo music and dance as fundamentally primal and thus antithetical to modern urban life in the Americas. Accordingly, Mexican filmmaker Chano Urueta's narrative in *Al son del mambo* placed the origins of the mambo in "primitive" or rural Cuba.

In this essay I will explore the mambo's reception in New York City, Havana, and Mexico City in the late 1940s and early 1950s. I am particularly interested in showing how and explaining why commentators (musicians, dancers, filmmakers, intellectuals, and journalists) across the Americas deployed conventional aspects of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century evolutionist and primitivist discourses in their representations and critiques of mambo. The complexities of evolutionist and primitivist discourse cannot be underestimated, for its applications vary in specific historical, political, artistic, and geographic contexts. For the purposes of this article, I refer to evolutionism and primitivism as these concepts were formulated in Europe as part of the ideological foundations of nineteenth-century archaeology, cultural anthropology, and social evolutionist theories, all of which posited non-Western people and cultures as racially and morally inferior, hence "primitive," in comparison with European peoples and civilization.[4] I also refer to primitivism in its early and mid-twentieth-century manifestation in Latin America, in which its applications toward the region's internal Others spurred nativist rejections of the mambo, which was perceived to have emanated from African American popular cultural forms.[5]

Despite the mambo's rich and prevalent history throughout the Americas, historians of the mambo have limited their work to defining its Cuban origins, debating its musical essence, and identifying the Cuban musician who invented the music and its key characteristics.[6]

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With too few exceptions, its reception across the Americas has been all but ignored, even though notions of primitivism and evolutionism as well as questions of national identity, racial othering, and sexuality seem to have been particularly important to its reception. As I will argue, North and Latin American musicians, dance critics, journalists, intellectuals, and filmmakers found in the discourses of primitivism and evolutionism effective ways to articulate their desires and anxieties concerning race, sexuality, and national identity. To theorize the mambo's resonance with these dominant desires and anxieties, I draw from Homi Bhabha's postcolonial and psychoanalytic approach to deconstructing the normativity in the valuing of one race, one system of sexual comportment, and one vision of national identity over others. Ultimately, I am interested in mambo's reception in Havana, New York City, and Mexico City not only to stress its transnational history but also to argue for a critical and transnational perspective on mambo that, in turn, will help us think about race in the Americas not in binary terms—United States versus Latin America—but rather in the flows and counterflows of colonial, racial, and nativist ideologies as enveloped within the discourses of primitivism and evolutionism, discourses that transcended national borders throughout the Americas and beyond.

Positing Primitivity in Mambo Dance

Like other transnational musical and dance styles, the mambo defies a simple definition. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, prior to its commercialization, mambo involved new ways of playing and dancing to Cuban *danzón* and *son* music, both of which had already been established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, respectively.[7] Its musical characteristics included the use of short (typically two measures) and syncopated rhythmic patterns at specific sections of an arrangement, usually at the finale.[8] This section constituted the liveliest part, in which dancers executed their most animated movements. Most historians agree that Orestes López of the Cuban *charanga* Arcaño y sus Maravillas composed the first mambo in Havana in the mid- to late 1930s.[9] The first mambo that Arcaño's *charanga* actually recorded, however, was Israel "Cachao" López's "Rarezas" in 1940. This new style of music and dance followed the *danzón*'s conventional rondolike form, but with an added syncopated and cyclic finale. Director Antonio Arcaño explained that this new final section featured the *nuevo ritmo* or "new rhythm" that members Orestes, Cachao, and others innovated for Cuban dancers, who reciprocated with inventive dance steps.[10] By 1943 Cuban *conjunto* leader Arsenio Rodríguez began to record *son* music that

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featured similar structural and rhythmic innovations. Rodríguez named his new final section *diablo* (devil) and similarly explained that this section was added to give dancers "a kick in the ass."[11] By 1944 Cuban arrangers René Hernández, Bebo Valdés, and Dámaso Pérez Prado began to implement syncopated figures in sections of their arrangements for the big bands of Julio Cueva, Casino de la Playa, and Hermanos Palau.[12]

The term *mambo* was not attributed to any one particular dance style at this time. Rather it was used to identify a new trend in the existing *danzón* dance choreography, while the dance styles associated with Arsenio Rodríguez's *conjunto* and the big bands were also known by the music's existing designations: *son montuno* and *guaracha*, respectively. Similarly, the recording industry did not use the term *mambo* in its marketing or labeling of these artists' records until 1945, at least five years after the mambo's key stylistic features had been formulated by Arcaño's *charanga*. Until then, Cuban musicians, as pianist and director René Touzet confirmed, were playing the music "with a mambo flavor, but we didn't call it mambo."[13]

The use of the term *mambo* took a similarly fluid trajectory in New York City. In 1946, as dancer Pedro Aguilar—better known as "Cuban Pete"—has noted, Latin dancers were dancing *danzón*, *son montuno*, *guaracha*, bolero, and rumba in dance halls such as the Grand Plaza and the Tropicana in the South Bronx and the Park Plaza in East Harlem.[14] Nevertheless, *guaracha* and rumba music as performed by Latin big bands began to include the new mambo section, which attracted the attention and excitement of Latin dancers. By 1947 and 1948 the popular press in Havana and New York City began to publish articles on an emerging "mambo revolution" in music and dance; band leaders began to claim the title "king of the mambo"; and recording companies began to use *mambo* to label their records.[15] Dance teachers also began to advertise mambo dance lessons in local newspapers.[16] Finally, New York's Spanish-language newspaper *El Diario de Nueva York* began to print ads referring to the Palladium Ballroom as the "cradle" or "home" of the mambo.

This coalescence of mambo music and dance with the recording, print media, and ballroom dance industries in New York City as well as Havana marked a significant stage in the history of mambo as a transnational popular culture phenomenon. While it had emerged as a local stylistic innovation in the performance of existing forms of Cuban music and dance, now it had also become an object of reification, fascination, and anxiety among socioeconomically and ethnically diverse observers and audiences throughout the Americas. Recording artists

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began to use compositions and arrangements that were based entirely on the syncopated sections of the *danzón*, *son montuno*, and *guaracha* as popularized by Cuban *charangas*, *conjuntos*, and big bands, respectively, in Havana in the early 1940s. Nevertheless, while Latin dancers in New York City adjusted their dancing to these new mambo arrangements, they also maintained the distinct dance styles associated with *danzón*, *son*, and *guaracha*.

In addressing the commodification of mambo dancing in New York City, it is important to note how professional dance teachers and Cuban and Puerto Rican social dancers apprehended Latin dance music differently. The Cuban and Puerto Rican dancers with whom I have worked emphasize the individualized, extemporaneous, and communal aspects that defined and inspired their dancing in the 1940s and 1950s. These dancers—as well as many Cuban and Puerto Rican musicians—have consistently used the term *feeling*, as in "feeling the music," in describing not only the inner emotions that are involved in dancing mambo but also the embodiment of the sounds and rhythmic textures created by musical groups.[17] In Cuba, one musician (Antonio Arcaño) noted that during the *danzón*'s mambo section the dancer would "[yell, *create*] steps and [contort] his body *in plain communion with us* [the musicians of his charanga]."[18] Such descriptions of dancing emanated from an embodied experience, in which sound and movement were merged through the body.

Many professional dance teachers in the United States, however, characterized the results of this extemporaneously driven and embodied approach to dancing as "extreme," "undisciplined," and thus requiring standardization in order to present the dance as a sellable commodity for the social or ballroom dance market. As Byrnes and Swanson noted, "The potential dance market is enormous. If *mambo* is *intelligently* demonstrated without that 'extreme effect,' [then] it will intrigue students of social dancing [everywhere]."[19] Byrnes and Swanson thus commodified the dance not only by taming the body's movements but also by quantifying and standardizing a sequence of dance steps, as did many other professional ballroom dance teachers. Both strategies helped ballroom dance teachers to better teach and market mambo dancing to mainstream American society (see Figure 1).

Moreover, we might read their concern over demonstrating the mambo "intelligently" and "without that 'extreme effect'" as not only driven by their commercial aims but also emanating from notions of "primitive" cultures and racial difference as formulated in the evolutionist discourse of the nineteenth century. I am referring specifically to that brand of primitivism with which nineteenth-century European

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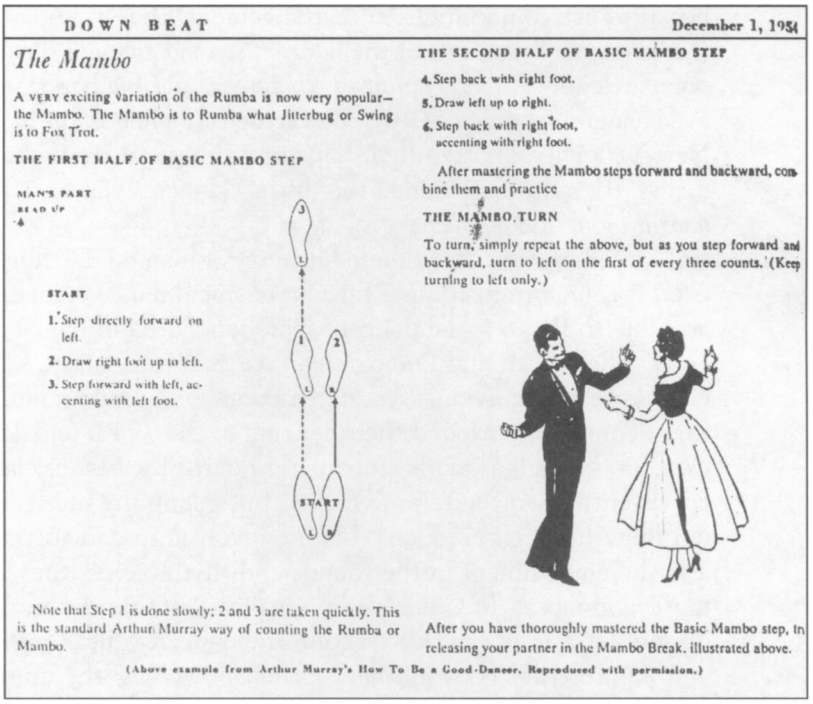

DOWN BEAT December 1, 1954

The Mambo

A VERY exciting variation of the Rumba is now very popular—the Mambo. The Mambo is to Rumba what Jitterbug or Swing is to Fox Trot.

THE FIRST HALF OF BASIC MAMBO STEP

MAN'S PART
HEAD UP

START

1. Step directly forward on left.
2. Draw right foot up to left.
3. Step forward with left, accenting with left foot.

Note that Step 1 is done slowly; 2 and 3 are taken quickly. This is the standard Arthur Murray way of counting the Rumba or Mambo.

THE SECOND HALF OF BASIC MAMBO STEP

4. Step back with right foot.
5. Draw left up to right.
6. Step back with right foot, accenting with right foot.

After mastering the Mambo steps forward and backward, combine them and practice

THE MAMBO TURN

To turn, simply repeat the above, but as you step forward and backward, turn to left on the first of every three counts. (Keep turning to left only.)

After you have thoroughly mastered the Basic Mambo step, try releasing your partner in the Mambo Break, illustrated above.

(Above example from Arthur Murray's How To Be a Good Dancer. Reproduced with permission.)

Figure 1. Mambo dance instructions such as these published in *Down Beat* (1 December 1954) appeared in numerous magazines in the United States throughout the 1950s.

archaeologists and anthropologists identified many contemporaneous non-Western peoples and their cultures as biological as well as cultural relics of modern Europeans' distant past.[20] From this perspective, European and Euro-American writers posited a "lack" of both sexual comportment and intelligence in modern "primitives," presenting their apparent deficiency in these cultural and biological areas either as signs of their retarded development in humanity's ascent to European civilization or as evidence of racial difference and the superiority of the white race.[21]

It was precisely these interrelated discourses of social evolutionism, "primitive" cultures, and white racial superiority from which Euro-American commentators of the mid-twentieth century continued to draw in describing the peculiarities and perceived dangers of mambo music and dancing.[22] In his article "Touch of Jungle Madness: Denizens of Broadway Go Slightly Primitive under Spell of the Wild Sweaty Mambo," Jess Stearn posited mambo's primitivity by identifying it as sexually uninhibited and African:

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> It [mambo] *may turn* the Great White Way into a veritable Congoland before it is through.
>
> It is wild. It is grotesque. It is sexy. It is the mambo.
>
> The mambo, danced to a tom-tom beat, is as primitive as any African war dance—without paint, feathers or hors d'oeuvres prepared from white explorers.[23]

White North American entertainers similarly drew from social evolutionist discourse in casting Latin musicians and mambo music as relics of the remote or "primitive" human past. The mainstream pop band leader and arranger Percy Faith, who had become popular in part because of his Latin novelty recordings, attempted to explain the mambo's popularity: "I think people like to hear this music because it takes them back to the primitive—back to the very beginning when there was just drums. If you throw four or five Latin drummers into a piece, it's an exciting splash of primitive color."[24]

To further interpret the significance of these statements, I draw from Homi Bhabha's theorization of the racist stereotype as it functions in colonial discourse.[25] Bhabha explains that the stereotype has been the major discursive strategy not merely of colonialism as a political institution but specifically in legitimizing the need for the colonial intervention in the first place. In this way we may interpret dance teachers' characterization of mambo dancing as "undisciplined," "unintelligent," or uncivilized as a way of legitimizing their interventions in the dance and reinforcing their notion of a hierarchical or teleological order of dancing. What is especially important to Bhabha's theory is the stereotype's "condition of ambivalence," which, as he explains, gives the stereotype and ideas of racial and cultural superiority their currency and allows for their replication across cultures and time.[26] Here we can see that Stearn used the stereotypes of black music as "uncivilized," "primitive," and "intoxicating"—stereotypes that were introduced into the racial discourse of the United States in the nineteenth century—to convey this otherwise novel dance and musical form in terms familiar to his readers and audience. It did not matter that mambo had nothing to do with practices such as cannibalism, nor that it was not a relic of Europeans' and Euro-Americans' cultural past.

Why then the need or desire to employ such stereotypes to convey a Cuban and Latin dance form as "African" and "primitive" in the first place? To answer this question I turn to Bhabha's application of Freud's theory of fetishism.[27] Stereotypes, Bhabha argues, function not merely as modes of making peoples and cultures familiar that are otherwise different, but also as mechanisms to cope with that difference.

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The recognition of racial difference produces anxiety and pleasure in the "colonist," who then displaces his or her anxiety and pleasure onto skin color, racial phenotype, or just simply the body of the Other.[28] Underlying this anxiety is the colonist's desire for racial and cultural purity or an undifferentiated origin. From this we might suggest that the sound of mambo music and the ways in which dancers used and moved their bodies to that sound reminded Stearn, Faith, and others of racial and cultural differences that threatened their fantasy of or desire for a culturally, moralistically, and racially homogeneous world.

It is especially revealing that Stearn focused his observations on white non-Latin women and attributed their enjoyment in dancing mambo to the music's "feverish intensity" and "contagiousness." With this in mind, we can sense the anxiety in Stearn's passages above, in which he cautions against the loss of the "Great White Way" (read the white race as well as Broadway) to "Congoland" (nonwhite "primitive" races) at the hands of the "wild," "grotesque," and "sexy" mambo.

Simultaneous to the disavowal of the equality or legitimacy of different races and cultures is the pleasure taken in mastering the Other; hence the commodification of mambo dancing by professional ballroom dance teachers. It is the stereotype's effectiveness, or what Bhabha calls "its regime of truth," that explains its prevalent use in the United States to articulate the anxiety and pleasure in and disavowal of recognizing racial and cultural difference. In short, mambo music and dancing simultaneously evoked in Euro-Americans intense desires for and anxieties concerning racial Others. Mambo's popularity in Latin America evoked similar anxieties and desires among Latin American intellectuals, artists, and audiences alike.

Racial Anxieties and Desiring the Primitive Other in Cuba and Mexico

Not unlike their North American counterparts, Cuban and Mexican intellectuals and artists were concerned with the mambo's apparent threat to their nations' cultural and racial integrity, as well as accepted notions of sexual comportment. Cuban writer Manuel Cuellar Vizcaíno reported the following from Havana in 1948: "The enemies of the mambo allege that with it the *danzón*'s elegance and grace disappears. . . . They claim that [mambo] came from the [North] Americans like an aggression on our *pure* national dance [*danzón*], introducing in it dull movements and gestures that have nothing to do with our customs."[29] One such enemy of mambo as danced by the Cuban youth was Cuban composer and music historian Odilio Urfé, who, also writing in 1948,

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attributed the dance's vulgarity and crudeness to North American models: "The *danzón*'s contemporary choreography is a crude copy . . . of the dances of the North Americans. They have completely erased the elegance and comportment that Cuban dancers in other eras made popular, like unequivocal signs of good morals. The youth of today will say that it is what is popular today, what is modern, but [this dance] will never cease to be vulgar."[30]

Mexican critic Federico Ortiz Jr., writing in 1951, expressed similar sentiments, though he specified in racial terms what his Cuban contemporaries might have actually been referring to as mambo's "North American" influences: "The mambo . . . according to the opinions of some academics . . . is nothing more than a classic deformation of the songs of the old African tribes, which still exist [i.e., as modern "primitives"], foreign melodies that originated in North American jazz. . . . It is hoped that the entire Americas react against this particular [music] and support the popular music of their own people, thereby displacing the music that comes to us from outside."[31] Robert Farris Thompson has suggested that African American popular forms of dance were introduced to black Cuban dancers through the black films *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* in the early 1940s.[32] Whatever the source of what Urfé and Ortiz perceived as the mambo's North American influences, they and other Latin American critics clearly conveyed a sense of anxiety toward what they saw as North American music's and dance's corruptive nature, foreignness, and vulgarity, or simply its blackness (see Figure 2).

Such racial and nativist anxieties among Latin American intellectuals date back to at least the late nineteenth century, when Cuban poet and independence leader José Martí used the discourse of *mestizaje* (racial miscegenation) to exhort all Latin Americans, regardless of race, to resist the United States' expansionist policies. Mexican educator and essayist José Vasconcelos, working in the 1920s, similarly criticized what he considered as the cultural and spiritual decadence of the United States, and used his intense anti-imperialist and anti-U.S. sentiments to construct a positive image of Mexican national identity based on the ideals of *mestizaje*.[33] Clearly, Martí's and Vasconcelos's visions of Cuban and Mexican national identity, which relied heavily on the *mestizaje* ideal of a racially harmonious and homogeneous society and their distrust of the United States, continued to shape the thinking of many Latin American intellectuals through the early 1950s.

Following World War II, however, a group of Latin American novelists and other artists shaped a distinct cultural project known as magical realism, which sought to articulate Latin American reality

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through the "primitive" myths and worldviews of Latin America's internal Others (i.e., Native American and Afro-Latin populations and cultures). Erik Camayd-Freixas has explored magical realism's formal and conventional aspects, including the unity of the individual, the collective, and the telluric, constituting the foundation of the "primitive's" worldview.[34]

In his film *Al son del mambo* (1950), Mexican screenplay writer and director Chano Urueta drew from this aspect of magical realism in dramatizing the mambo's creation as a product of humankind's unity with nature, all of which takes place within the broader context of

Figure 2. This image, published in the Cuban magazine *Bohemia* (30 May 1948), depicts Cuban youth dancing to Arcaño's *charanga* in Havana.

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"primitive" Cuba. Urueta's narrative begins with the arrival of three Mexican sojourners to Havana, from where they then undertake a trip to rural Cuba in search of the most primal way of life. Along the way the party is filmed traveling in a horse-drawn cart down a dirt road, accompanied by a black Cuban trio singing "Angelitos negros" [Black Angels]. Originally composed as the poem "Píntame angelitos negros" [Paint Black Angels for Me] by Venezuelan poet and politician Andrés Eloy Blanco in 1946, "Angelitos negros" critiques the absence of black angels in paintings of heaven. As Theresa Delgadillo has pointed out, this critique can be extended to the exclusion of blacks from full participation in the nation, thereby contesting Latin America's myth of racial democracy and revealing its prevailing racial hierarchies within the ideology of *mestizaje*.[35] To further dramatize the song's message of the humanity of blacks, one of the Mexican travelers, played by the comedian Resortes, caresses a black boy who has joined the other travelers in the cart. Yet the black boy—as will be the case with almost all the black male musicians whom the Mexican travelers encounter upon their arrival in "primitive" Cuba—is not given a speaking role. This instance of the silenced black voice in *Al son del mambo* had also occurred in the adaptation of the poem to its song form, which, as Delgadillo notes, involved the erasure of Negra Juana, the poem's principal black character.[36]

Having arrived at their destination, a compound in "primitive" Cuba, the Mexican travelers are greeted by their Cuban hosts, including white Cuban actress Amalia Aguilar, who plays a sexually promiscuous mambo dancer. Her love interest, Roberto Dávila (played by Roberto Romaña), joins the other Mexican travelers in search of musical inspiration in nature. In one scene the frustrated composer is shown surreptitiously following the compound's resident musician, played by Dámaso Pérez Prado, as the latter transcribes the songs of birds. Thrilled over his discovery, the Mexican composer offers to assist Pérez Prado, who confesses that he does not know how to "organize" these sounds into music (see Figure 3). Their finished product is the mambo "José," which Pérez Prado actually composed and arranged himself and recorded for RCA Victor around 1949, not in Cuba but in Mexico City.

The scene in which Pérez Prado transcribes the sounds of birds evokes not only magical realism's assimilation of humanity and nature, but specifically Charles Darwin's theory of the origins of music. According to Darwin, music, beginning with vocal music, evolved from primitive man's ability to attract a mate with his mating call. Those characteristics of his voice that were attractive to the opposite sex would have been passed on to succeeding generations, a process Darwin called

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"sexual selection." He identified this process in the evolution of not only humans but also the animal world, particularly birds.[37] Not surprisingly, the scene in which Dávila and Pérez Prado premiere their new mambo "José" showcases Amalia Aguilar, the Cuban mulatta actress Rita Montaner, and the Dolly Sisters (a popular mambo dance team), all dancing provocatively to the black musicians' mambo mating call, as it were.

Besides its magical realist and Darwinian narratives of the mambo's origins, this scene and the "Angelitos negros" scene convey key contradictions that Camayd-Freixas and others have identified in applications of primitivism and *mestizaje* toward defining national identity in Latin America and specifically in Mexico.[38] As Camayd-Freixas notes, Latin American painters and writers of the early twentieth century "turned their gazes home," seeking a "reformulation of identity starting from non-Western autochthony."[39] Yet many European misrepresentations inherent in primitivism—for instance, that contemporaneous folk cultures of nonwhite peoples were relics of a bygone era—were transmitted along with primitivism. Camayd-Freixas summarizes that "primitivism [in Latin America] often becomes a melancholic expression of disillusionment, a compensatory search for the ideal values lost to modernity, but also a sublimation of its very own unconfessed fetishism of [Western notions of] progress."[40] Similarly, Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas has shown that, from the 1920s through the 1960s, Mexican novelists, filmmakers, and intellectuals, beginning with José Vasconcelos, deployed the

Figure 3. Movie still from *Al son del mambo* (1950).

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ideology of *mestizaje* in ways that systematically erased or obfuscated the black African presence in Mexican society and culture.[41] Hernández Cuevas is particularly concerned with showing how black phobia and "the white aesthetic" (or Eurocentric views of beauty, civility, and progress) lay at the foundations of the *mestizaje* ideal in twentieth-century Mexico.

These ideological impasses so fundamental to the Latin American intellectual, political, and cultural climate of the twentieth century are especially evident in Urueta's film. For instance, the Mexican sojourners desire a primitive black Cuba not merely out of their dissatisfaction with Mexican modernity but also to paternalistically guide the former out of its arrested development toward their idealized form of social and cultural progress.[42] This paternalism, which was characteristic of the legitimizing forces of European colonialism, is signaled by Dávila's guidance of Pérez Prado through the latter's "lack" of knowledge (read arrested musical development) in arranging and orchestrating music, in order to realize his own primitivist desire to organize nature's sounds into a new kind of musical art that would be on a par with European symphonic masterpieces.[43] Another instance of colonialist and racist paternalism is signaled in Resortes's caresses of the black Cuban boy during the singing of "Angelitos negros." Ultimately, Urueta's portrayal of Mexicans both discovering the mambo and projecting their paternalism upon black Cubans signals his own anxiety over and disavowal of not only Mexico's own black population but also the significant presence in Mexico City of black Cubans, including Pérez Prado, who had a tremendous impact on popularizing mambo in Mexico in the late 1940s. As Hernández Cuevas notes:

> To speak of the possibility of a black experience and of a black identity in a country conceived of as a mestizo-nation-in-the-process-of-whitening, may have been considered tantamount to an act of dissidence. . . . [In Mexican cinema of the late 1940s and early 1950s] blacks are exotic, purely musical and passionate beings from a tropical paradigm (victimized servants, innocent children, or resigned friends) who are capable of unquestioning love and friendship for the "white" characters.[44]

Similarly, Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal has shown that the dominant conception of national identity in Cuba, Mexico, and, indeed, throughout Latin America through the first half of the twentieth century was based on the idea of *mestizaje*, which posited a monocultural and racially homogeneous national identity.[45] In advocating the ideology of *mestizaje*,

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Latin American intellectuals neutralized their respective nations' culturally and racially pluralistic societies. Martínez-Echazábal argues that racial and cultural pluralism was "considered by many politically counterproductive in the face of Latin America's move toward refurbishing the nation-state."[46] No wonder Cuban and Mexican intellectuals and filmmakers such as Odilio Urfé, Chano Urueta, and Federico Ortiz Jr. expressed a sense of anxiety over the mambo's presence and popularity in Cuba and Mexico. In conceiving the mambo as black, yet not Cuban or Mexican, they denied both the presence and cultural vitality of their nations' black populations and thus the contributions of black Cuban as well as Mexican musicians and dancers to the mambo's development in Havana and Mexico City.

Displacing the Mambo in Space and Time: Conclusions

I began this essay by identifying three rhetorical devices from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century primitivist and evolutionist discourses that defined the representation and reception of mambo in the United States and Latin America. They are (1) the positing of a "lack" of intelligence, discipline, sexual comportment, and knowledge of organizing sounds in Latin and Afro-Latin mambo dancers and musicians; (2) the othering of the music, musicians, and dancers racially, spatially, and temporally; and (3) the imagining of the music's primal origins in nature. I have argued that these rhetorical devices served North and Latin American commentators as effective means through which to deal with the sounds and movements that emanated from the bodies of racial and cultural Others. In basing this argument on Bhabha's use of fetishism to theorize racist stereotypes, I suggest that these commentators' representations of mambo ultimately emanated from a shared sense of anxiety over and desire for racial and cultural Others whose sounds and bodily movements did not complement these commentators' concepts of a culturally and racially homogeneous nation. Because of the constructed temporal framework within which primitivist and evolutionist discourse operates, commentators in New York City, Havana, and Mexico City were enabled to displace these racial Others and their cultures as well as even themselves in space and time. Hence, we have pop musician Percy Faith's assertion that listening to Latin musicians playing mambo "takes [the listener] back to the primitive—back to the very beginning when there was just drums." We should interpret such assertions not merely as negligible acts of fantasy, but rather as rhetorically violent gestures whose power has enabled musicians, dancers, journalists, historians, anthropologists, archeologists, ethnomusicologists, colonialists, and the

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colonized to deny others' temporal coevalness, cultural legitimacy, and racial equality.

In comparing the reception and representation of mambo in the United States, Cuba, and Mexico, we can observe how such racial and cultural anxieties, disavowals, and desires have supported a transnational history of race and racism in the Americas. For instance, the objects that journalist Jess Stearn displaced in time and space to a "primitive" and "veritable Congoland" were the sounds and movements that emanated from the Latin and Euro-American bodies of mambo musicians and dancers; and it was Stearn's desire to immunize the bodies of white non-Latin female dancers in particular from the contagiousness that was passed on by virtue of the mambo's sounds and movements. Cuban composer and music historian Odilio Urfé expressed a similar anxiety over the racially corruptive danger in "North" (read black) American sounds and bodily movements. Not unlike Stearn, Urfé desired to keep Cuba's youth and national dance form—both of which for Urfé and others had been sufficiently "whitened" racially, if not culturally—immune from the racially and culturally degenerating forces of "North" (read black) American popular culture.[47] And then there were the Mexicans Federico Ortiz Jr. and Chano Urueta, who displaced the mambo as "primitive" and not Mexican (i.e., black American for the former and black Cuban for the latter). While Ortiz, Urfé, Stearn, and others warned of the mambo's racial and cultural otherness, other North and Latin Americans adopted a colonialist paternalism in their interventions to realize the mambo's terpsichorean refinement and market potential, as well as its primal or "primitive" musical genius.

As Johannes Fabian notes, "primitive" is "the key term [or rhetorical device] of a temporalizing discourse," which allowed nineteenth-century sociologists and anthropologists to displace or distance non-Western peoples and cultures both spatially and temporally.[48] Here "primitive" is understood as an "allochronic device," that is, a device to deny, as Fabian puts it, *coevalness* among cultures and peoples.[49] This denial of coevalness as a device of temporally and spatially othering in anthropology evokes comparison with Bhabha's psychoanalytic interpretation of the simultaneous disavowal and recognition of racial difference in colonialist discourse. While Fabian stresses the generalization of naturalized or evolutionary time as the basis for anthropologists' denial of the coevalness of the Other, Bhabha emphasizes colonists' desire for a culturally, moralistically, and racially homogeneous world as the basis for both their anxiety over racial difference and the currency of racist stereotypes. As such, both evolutionary time and the superiority of white Eurocentric culture and value systems have served commentators

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throughout the Americas as the normative frameworks through which they displaced mambo music and dancing in space and time.

Notes

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1. Don Byrnes and Alice Swanson, "Mambo: A Vest Pocket Analysis," *Dance Magazine*, October 1951, 36.

2. Jess Stearn, "Touch of Jungle Madness: Denizens of Broadway Go Slightly Primitive under Spell of the Wild Sweaty Mambo," *New York Daily News*, 6 May 1951.

3. Carlos Durante, "Pérez 'Prado' en La Picota: Nueve intelectuales opinan sobre los mambos del Cara de Foca," *El Nacional*, 24 February 1951.

4. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), and Peter Bowler, *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

5. See Erik Camayd-Freixas, "Narrative Primitivism: Theory and Practice in Latin America," in *Primitivism and Identity in Latin America: Essays on Art, Literature, and Culture*, ed. Erik Camayd-Freixas and José Eduardo González (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).

6. See Leonardo Acosta, "¿Quién inventó el mambo?" in *El mambo*, ed. Radamés Giro (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1993); Acosta, "Reajustes, aclaraciones y criterios sobre Dámaso Pérez Prado," in *El mambo*, ed. Radamés Giro (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1993); Cristóbal Díaz Ayala, *Música cubana del areyto a la nueva trova*, 3rd ed. (San Juan: Editorial Cubanacan, 1993); Natalio Galán, *Cuba y sus sones* (Valencia: Artes Gráficos Soler, 1983); Radamés Giro, "Todo lo que usted quiso saber sobre el mambo," in *El mambo*, ed. Radamés Giro; Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); and Max Salazar, "Who Invented the Mambo?" *Latin Beat Magazine* 2, no. 8 (1992): 9–14.

7. The *charanga* type of ensemble typically performed *danzónes*, while the *sexteto*, *septeto*, and *conjunto* performed *sones*. The *charanga* ensemble consisted of flute, violins, double bass, piano, timbales, and güiro. The *sexteto*, *septeto*, and *conjunto* were trumpet-based ensembles with the addition of the *tres* (Cuban folk guitar), double bass, bongos, maracas, vocals, and, in the case of *conjuntos*, piano and conga drums.

8. For musical examples and analysis of these rhythms, please see David García, *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 41–55.

9. In fact, historians have given various dates for the composition of "Mambo." Odilio Urfé, for example, claimed that it was composed as early as 1935. See Urfé, "Danzón,

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mambo, y chachachá," *Revolución y Cultura* 77 (1979): 54–57. To complicate things more, Arcaño y sus Maravillas did not record "Mambo" until 1951. To my knowledge, this recording of "Mambo" is the earliest documented (either recorded or notated) source of this particular piece.

10. Ileana Boudet, "Arcaño y sus Maravillas," *Revolución y Cultura* 25 (1974): 35.

11. García, *Arsenio Rodríguez*, 50.

12. The Cuban big band's instrumentation combined American swing band instrumentation, including trumpets, trombones, and saxophone sections, with the Cuban *conjunto* rhythm section of double bass, piano, congas, and bongos.

13. Touzet left Havana for New York City in 1944. René Touzet, telephone interview by author, 6 March 2000.

14. Pedro Aguilar, interview by Henry Medina, 1983.

15. Manuel Cuellar Vizcaíno, "La revolución del mambo," *Bohemia*, 30 May 1948.

16. See *La Prensa*, 4 November 1949.

17. Elsewhere I have discussed the role of *son* dancers in the formation and embodiment of Arsenio Rodríguez's *son montuno* style. See García, *Arsenio Rodríguez*, 41–47.

18. Cuellar Vizcaíno, "La revolución del mambo," 97 (my emphases).

19. Byrnes and Swanson, "Mambo: A Vest Pocket Analysis," 29.

20. Bowler, *Invention of Progress*, 76–77.

21. Bowler, *Invention of Progress*, 35, 80, 106. Ronald Radano has shown that the denial of intelligence to African Americans to support notions of racial difference and white racial superiority had become a common trope in the United States by the mid-nineteenth century. See Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 146–48.

22. Racist perceptions of black rhythm as "infectious" and thus "threatening" to white propriety emerged in the United States in the late nineteenth century and spread throughout the popular consciousness. These notions of black rhythm developed out of early nineteenth-century travelogues of African music written by British explorers, which simultaneously caught the fascination and evoked the anxiety of white Americans. See Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 233–47.

23. Stearn, "Touch of Jungle Madness."

24. Leonard Feather, "Percy: No Faith in Phony Latins!" *Down Beat*, 19 November 1952, 12.

25. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). See chap. 3, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism."

26. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 94–96.

27. See *Location of Culture*, 106–8, in which Bhabha explains his application of Freud's theory of fetishism to read the use of racist stereotypes in colonial discourse as driven by the anxiety and desire experienced in the recognition/disavowal of sexual/racial difference.

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28. Bhabha also bases much of his theory concerning race and colonial discourse on Frantz Fanon's own theoretical work in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

29. Cuellar Vizcaíno, "La revolución del mambo," 21 (my emphasis).

30. Odilio Urfé, "La verdad sobre el mambo," *Inventario* 1, no. 3 (June 1948): 34–35.

31. Federico Ortiz Jr., "El mambo y su influencia malsana," *La opinión*, 8 July 1951, 7.

32. Robert Farris Thompson, "Teaching the People to Triumph over Time: Notes from the World of Mambo," in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 338.

33. Amaryll Chanady, "Identity, Politics, and *Mestizaje*," in *Contemporary Latin American Cultural Studies*, ed. Stephen Hart and Richard Young (London: Arnold, 2003), 193–95.

34. Camayd-Freixas, "Narrative Primitivism," 111–15.

35. Theresa Delgadillo, "Singing 'Angelitos Negros': African Diaspora Meets *Mestizaje* in the Americas," *American Quarterly* 58 (June 2006): 407–30.

36. Delgadillo, "Singing 'Angelitos Negros,'" 409.

37. See Peter Kivy, "Charles Darwin on Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 12 (Spring 1959): 42–48.

38. Erik Camayd-Freixas, "Introduction: The Returning Gaze," in *Primitivism and Identity in Latin America*, ed. Camayd-Freixas and González (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).

39. Camayd-Freixas, "Introduction," xiii–xiv.

40. Camayd-Freixas, "Introduction," xviii.

41. Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, *African Mexicans and the Discourse on Modern Nation* (Dallas, TX: University Press of America, 2004).

42. Bowler notes that, in the nineteenth century, European colonial powers appropriated the notions of social progress and evolution, as these were formulated by anthropologists and archaeologists, to legitimize their colonial expansions into the non-Western world. See Bowler, *Invention of Progress*, 29–39.

43. On the cart ride to primitive Cuba, Dávila shares with one of his cotravelers his desire to create a musical work of symphonic proportions and importance from the sounds of nature.

44. Hernández Cuevas, *African Mexicans*, 76.

45. Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal, "*Mestizaje* and the Discourse of National/Cultural Identity in Latin America, 1845–1959," *Latin American Perspectives* 25 (May 1998): 21–42.

46. Martínez-Echazábal, "*Mestizaje* and the Discourse of National/Cultural Identity," 38.

47. For critiques of Cuba's racial and national ideology, see Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of

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North Carolina Press, 1995); Katherine Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); and García, *Arsenio Rodríguez*, 12–31.

48. See Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 25, 82; and Bowler, *Invention of Progress*, 33, 87. In addition to primitive, Fabian lists *civilization*, *evolution*, *development*, *acculturation*, *modernization*, *savage*, *tribal*, and *traditional* as terms "whose conceptual content derives . . . from evolutionary Time" (17).

49. Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 38–39, 121.

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