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Review/Reseña

Feldman, Heidi Carolyn. *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.

African Diasporic Music Making Beyond the United States and Circum-Caribbean

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While well-known to most Peruvians, particularly those who are originally from the coastal region, Afroperuvian music has, until recently, had little dissemination outside of Peru. Heidi Feldman's *Black Rhythms of Peru* is the first published monograph-length study on Afroperuvian music in two and a half decades and the first to be widely available outside of Peru. Largely based on field work and archival research conducted between 1998 and 2000 in Peru, the United States and Spain, the book focuses on the Afroperuvian revival movement and its legacy from the 1950s into the turn of the twenty first century. Feldman's central concern is the role that

memory projects have in the construction of a diasporic identity and how these are realized in geographical areas that have generally been omitted from or marginal to discussion of the Black Atlantic (namely, the circum Caribbean, the United States and Brazil). To this end, she posits the notion of the Black Pacific and suggests that descendants of Africans of the Andean Pacific coast have to contend with a number of different challenges: social invisibility and scarce documentation regarding the African experience in the region, lack of a continuously preserved African cultural heritage, and the presence of a large indigenous and mestizo populations that have often been more influential in the development of local race politics and accompanying ideologies of hybridity, assimilation, and national belonging. These social and historical circumstances, Feldman argues, have complicated the notion of double consciousness given that to many of the individuals in the Black Pacific, the sense of an ancestral African homeland is more directly related to their imagining of the Black Atlantic and that “leaders of the Afro-Peruvian revival appropriated as ‘African’ heritage some cultural traditions born, creolized, or syncretized in the Black Atlantic” (8). From this perspective, Feldman sees the various memory projects discussed in this book as a series of competing ways of imagining the Afroperuvian past. Furthermore, her main interest is not distilling a single history of the development of Afroperuvian music as much as describing how different perspectives have influenced different ways of remembering that imagined history.

The first chapter of *Black Rhythms of Peru* deals with the noted scholar and folklorist José Durand Flores and his work with the first professionally staged reconstructions of Afroperuvian musical dance: the *Pancho Fierro Company* in the 1950s. Feldman links Durand’s motivation to the nostalgic yearning for the past that characterized much of a number of middle and upper class criollo identity projects during this time period. As a criollo of European descent and a member of the intellectual elite of the time, Durand very much felt that Lima’s cultural identity was in the process of fading away. The chapter documents how he combined his academic interest in rare books and historical documents with his passion for the music and dance practices of Lima’s popular sectors and “opened a

new public space in for Black performance in Peru that encouraged other White criollos to view Black traditions as cultural treasures” (26). The chapter chronicles Durand’s collaboration with figures such as Porfirio Vásquez and Juan Criado, the formation of the aforementioned *Pancho Fierro Company*, and the way in which Durand combined historical research, ethnographic testimonies, and the musical knowledge of this collaborators to develop professional stage reenactments of the carnival dance the *son de los diablos*. The concluding discussion credits Durand with having sparked an interest in Afroperuvian music and dance that would be further developed by artists and intellectuals of African descent in the decades that followed. In fact, in addition to Porfirio Vásquez, the Pancho Fierro Company also provided a start for a number of future prominent artists, including Nicomedes Santa Cruz and a number of the founding members of Perú Negro (whose legacies are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively). At the same time, Feldman brings attention to the way that Durand’s concerns and primary interest in “rescuing” the Afroperuvian repertoire (a concern that the author identifies as primarily academic in nature) were not necessarily compatible with those of many of the Afroperuvian members of the company, thus setting the stage for a more in depth-analysis of how, in the years and decades that follow, a number of Afroperuvian performers and intellectuals would reinterpret the notion of cultural reclamation through various Black diasporic memory projects.

The next two chapters are devoted to siblings Victoria and Nicomedes Santa Cruz. The chapters are a complementary pair, each highlighting the different approaches that each of the siblings had towards the reconstruction, reinvention and promotion of Afroperuvian music and dance. In the case of Victoria Santa Cruz, Feldman focuses on her contributions and innovations as a choreographer, many of which serve as the foundation for the subsequent canonization of Afroperuvian dance genres during the 1970s. Feldman covers Santa Cruz’s astounding artistic trajectory, including her co-directorship of one of the first black theatre and dance companies in Peru, her studies in theatre and choreography in Paris, her seminal work as director of Teatro y Danzas Negras del Peru and

Conjunto Nacional de Folklore, and her seventeen year professorship at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA. Throughout the chapter, Feldman provides valuable insights into Santa Cruz's hard to pin down philosophy of performance, often combining data gathered from interviews with Santa Cruz and former members of one of her companies with Santa Cruz's own writings and declarations on the matter. The result is a rich narrative where the voices of the author and her subject often intertwine, giving the reader a glimpse of the challenges that Feldman had to face while engaging with one of the most elusive and admired (and feared) figures in the realm of Afroperuvian music making.

In contrast, the chapter on Nicomedes Santa Cruz follows as a more historical assessment of his contributions to the Afroperuvian music and dance revival. Unlike Victoria, whose approach is largely rooted in the experiential and the body, Nicomedes' interests were in historical and ethnographic research, folklore, and literature. Consequently, Feldman focuses her discussion primarily on his work as a scholar, activist, and principal advocate for the revalorization of Afroperuvian forms of expressive culture from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. Thanks to her work with his personal library in Spain, Feldman is able to critically reconstruct the process by which Nicomedes Santa Cruz developed many of his theories regarding the origins and developments of Afroperuvian music and dance genres, how these theories were informed by his affinity to the Latin American negritud(e) movement, and how both of these in turn influenced the contemporary musical reinterpretation of genres like the *festejo* and the *landó*. Feldman concludes the chapter by examining the successes and failures of Nicomedes Santa Cruz's project and the impact that his legacy had on subsequent generations of Afroperuvian performers.

Chapter Four of *Black Rhythms of Peru* is devoted to the seminal dance company *Perú Negro*. Throughout the 1970s, *Perú Negro* was instrumental in the consolidation and subsequent canonization of the Afroperuvian revival repertoire. Feldman contextualizes *Perú Negro*'s achievements within the political climate of the 1970s and the company's role in helping define an "official" Afroperuvian set of music and dances that would become an integral part of the State-sponsored

institutionalization of regional musical practices as “national folklore.” Largely devoted to the first generation of *Perú Negro* performers (the company is still in existence under the guidance of the children and grandchildren of the original founding members), the chapter discusses the group’s further expansion of the Afroperuvian repertoire. It also examines the visual, choreographic and musical re-Africanization of that repertoire and the influence of a number of close friends and collaborators who made part of the company’s “extended family” in this process. Along the way, Feldman brings about a number of thoughtful points regarding the professional staged representation of Afroperuvian music and dance ranging from the ambivalent, and at times problematic, role of musical and visual archetypes as stylized signifiers of blackness, to the commodification of the repertoire and its performance to largely non-Afroperuvian audiences.

The last two chapters expand the scope of the discussion beyond Lima’s professional musical environment. Chapter Five is devoted to the province of Chincha on the southern coast, and more specifically to the district of El Carmen, which in the second part of the twentieth century was identified as the cradle of Afroperuvian musical traditions. The opening sections discuss the legend of Chincha and the various pilgrimages to the area by scholars, revival artists, photographers, pop musicians and tourists of various stripes seeking to find the rural “original” that served as inspiration for the urban musical practices found in Lima’s professional stages. Expanding on notions of authenticity and strategic essentialism discussed in the previous chapter, Feldman problematizes the notion of the tourist gaze and its desire to find those elusive back-spaces where “real” culture is enacted. The main protagonist of this chapter is the Ballumbrosio family, whose role as mediators between the various social actors that congregate in El Carmen at times validates and at times challenges the existence of “staged” and “real” spaces. Through discussion of local events like that of *Verano Negro* and *Navidad Negra* and the collaboration of members of the Ballumbrosio family with Peruvian rocker Miki González, the author argues for a hybrid space where contradictory perceptions of

Chincha, as both as cradle of Afroperuvian authenticity and as the ultimate staged “front space” seem to coexist.

The final chapter of *Black Rhythms of Peru* is devoted to the more recent “discovery” of Afroperuvian music abroad. As it would be expected, one of the central figures of this chapter is Susana Baca, an artist whose music has become to many foreign listeners synonymous with the Afroperuvian music. Starting once again with the idea of “discovering” secret or hidden music, Feldman brings to light the irony that Baca’s international success is underscored by the fact that her departures from the Afroperuvian canon, her stylistic experimentation, and her interest in musical settings of avant-garde poetry were not particularly well received by local audiences. In fact, the author argues that Baca has sought a more cosmopolitan interpretation of tradition which, although still rooted in the Afroperuvian experience, seeks to find an artistic common ground with artists from the United States, Europe and other parts of Latin America. Feldman then problematizes Baca’s perceived role as an ambassador of “authentic” Afroperuvian music by asking whether international audiences are ready to accept the notion that Baca often sees herself as an artists whose music should not necessarily be defined by her African heritage or her national origin. In contrast to Baca, an artist living in Peru but seeking to artistically move beyond her locality when performing abroad, the second part of the chapter is devoted to the immigrant Peruvian community and artists living abroad (mostly in the Los Angeles area) who have come to “discover” Afroperuvian music as a means of nostalgically reconnecting to their home country. Feldman casts these as mirror images that are shaped as much by the artists themselves as by their audiences, and she explains how the expectations of the latter also form a part of the process of reinvention and remembering that has been the common thread of the entire monograph.

The conclusions bring us to the turn of the twentieth century where Feldman briefly discusses some of the new currents and artists who in their own way are adding to the legacy of the original revival movement. The author reminds us of the multiplicity of voices and opinions that can still be found in the realm of Afroperuvian music making and of the way that

younger generations of performers such as the members of Grupo Teatro del Milenio are once again recreating the past in the present by simultaneously reproducing and questioning the approaches of their predecessors. To Feldman, the fundamental difference between the Black Pacific and the Black Atlantic is the importance that is placed on the various notions of what constitutes “the real” past. In the Afroperuvian case, these competing notions are continually reordered and reconstituted through the continued iteration of a repertoire that was largely developed, refined and expanded during the second part of the twentieth century. This in turn places an emphasis on the fixed rather than the adaptable side of Gilroy’s “changing same”.

Black Rhythms of Peru is a welcome addition to a number of important areas of scholarship. Historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and cultural studies scholars interested in Peru will find this book an important contribution to a growing but nonetheless still underrepresented area of study dealing with non-indigenous minority communities. Similarly, ethnomusicologists will find a compelling case study from a region that has historically been associated with Andean popular traditions and will hopefully see the need for further research regarding the music of other Afro descendant communities in Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina. Scholars interested in the African diaspora in Latin America will also find the book of interest, particularly because of its emphasis on identifying and defining pragmatic and conceptual differences between the Black Atlantic and the Black Pacific. Feldman’s writing is clear, passionate, and ethnographically sensitive. Most often, the author successfully maintains an equilibrium between giving voice to multiple and often contradictory perspectives and providing a critical assessment of the contributions of these various individuals to Afroperuvian the revival movement. This is particularly the case in the chapters dealing with Jose Durand, Nicomedes Santa Cruz, and Peru Negro. Occasionally though, the author’s balancing attempts tip decidedly towards the former more than the latter. Such is the case with the chapters dealing with Victoria Santa Cruz and Chincha. In both instances, the chapters are very intimate and seek to highlight the complexities of the relationship that Feldman developed with

the individuals with whom she collaborated, often being careful not to demystify or dismantle their claims and worldview for the sake of “objective” research. The intent is admirable and the finesse with which these chapters are crafted—particularly the one dealing with Victoria Santa Cruz—is a triumph in its own right. Unfortunately, the reader is left to search between the lines for the author’s critique and ultimately misses the author’s valuable insights into the motivations and agendas that fuel their particular memory projects as well as how these are perceived by other members of the Afroperuvian community. These, however, are minor issues in an otherwise masterfully written and meticulously researched monograph.

Seven years into the new millennium, the revival repertoire remains an important aspect of Afroperuvian musical identity, although the renewed interest in Afroperuvian music over the last few years has begun to move in a different direction. Some of the cosmopolitan tendencies and emphasis on fusions as well as collaborations with artists from other parts of the world that Feldman describes during last chapter and conclusion have more and more become the norm (for example, the experimentation with Andean music, jazz, salsa, and electrónica). In this atmosphere, musicians have increasingly become more interested in the creative and experimental legacy of the revival rather than its, at times, orthodox emphasis on cultural salvage and preservation of an imagined past. However, little information is available to these musicians, many of them too young to have witnessed the performances of the *Pancho Fierro Company*, *Cumanana* or the original *Perú Negro Company*, regarding these aspects of the revival repertoire. In this sense, *Black Rhythms of Peru*, whose Spanish translation hopefully will be available to Peruvian readers in a near future, will also make a timely contribution to the current debate regarding the future of Afroperuvian music.