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Review/Reseña

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

Positioning the Past in the Present: Feldman's "Memory Projects" and the Afro-Peruvian Music and Dance Revival

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A few years ago, when I heard that a young North American scholar was in Peru conducting research on Afro-Peruvian music, I have to admit reacting to the news with mixed feelings. As an insider performer and researcher of Afro-Peruvian music and dance traditions I know of local artists and scholars' disappointment when foreign work and its profit doesn't make it back to the people who contributed to the study. Moreover, there is always a concern about how the native voice is spoken and heard indirectly through the mouth of a foreign researcher whose prestige is based on his membership to what ethnomusicologist Stephen Loza (2006) calls "Euroamericentric" academic hegemony and at the expense of the

native voice. But overall I was curious and excited. The African descent population of Peru has historically been ignored, and it has been the effort of historians, local artists and activists to give voice to their presence in the sociocultural fabric of the Peruvian nation. I believe Feldman's book *Black Rhythms of Peru*, is an important "brick" in the ever increasing structure that is composed of Afro-Peruvian scholarship, activism, and artistry born of the same house.

Black Rhythms of Peru, an over 300-page long ethnomusicological work, is a much needed systematic and well-researched study on testimonies and other materials, that when put together help construct the history of the revival of Afro-Peruvian music and dance traditions. This history covers the time span from the late 1950's to the present day. However, Feldman clarifies that this is not a history book that describes "what happened." Instead it is "a compendium of vestiges of the remembered histories that endure in today's cultural memory and archival artifacts... how what happened is remembered and how such memories affect contemporary Afro-Peruvian identity" (12). Feldman supports her analysis through remarkable research. Her study consists of numerous interviews and extensive archived material that include Afro-Peruvian poet Nicomedes Santa Cruz' personal research materials archived in Madrid, Spain, and white intellectual José Durand's personal collection of books and manuscripts located at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. Such research is much appreciated by local artists and scholars with limited access to such collections.

As a non-native speaker of English, I found this book clear and easy to read. Most chapters include travel diaries making it livelier and helping the reader understand Feldman's perspective on her recent discovery of Afro-Peruvian art. This book also includes western notation musical transcriptions of songs, instrumental parts, or rhythmic patterns. These aids help illustrate the complexity of Afro-Peruvian music, such as the ever present tension between duple and triple meter or to show the indigenous influence in certain Afro-Peruvian musical practices (e.g. songs that are part of the *Atajo de Negritos* tradition in Chincha). I personally believe that one major contribution of this book to the existing scholarship on related

Afro-Peruvian music (Tompkins 1981; Vasquez 1982; Leon 1997, 2003; Romero 1994, as well as other semi-scholarly studies) is the compilation of life histories of some of the main characters involved in Afro-Peruvian music and dance production since the 1950s.

A main theme in Feldman's approach to her study is *memory*. According to Feldman memory works in two ways. First, it serves as a tool through which Afro-Peruvians and those involved in the revival remembered a collective past they did not personally experience ("cultural memory"). Examples show how some artists found ways to return to an imagined Africa homeland, while others relocated "African" homeland in the Black Atlantic (i.e. Afro-Cuban or Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions) to recreate forgotten music and dances from their ancestors. Secondly, this memory is selective because certain agendas and present-day goals guide people in remembering particular elements of the past while excluding others ("memory projects"). Feldman explains that the recreation of Afro-Peruvian music and dance traditions was a reaction to –and was shaped by– Afro-Peruvians' ambivalent position. On the one hand, Afro-Peruvians were considered as part of Peruvian coastal *criollo* culture without the benefits white criollos enjoyed. On the other, Afro-Peruvians were both part of and separated from the Black Atlantic diaspora. As a result the different memory projects in the revival emphasized Africa, the Black Atlantic, and Peruvian *criollo* culture to reproduce and stage a black Peruvian past.

Each chapter of *Black Rhythms of Peru* provides examples of particular individuals or artistic groups and how they used their own memory projects to reinvent Afro-Peruvian music and dance traditions. In chapter one Feldman begins the history of the revival with the intervention of white *criollo* intellectual José Durand. Feldman identifies Durand's memory project as "criollo nostalgia," an intricate concept thoroughly discussed in Javier León's work (1997). *Criollo* nostalgia is a sentiment identified at the core of Peruvian urban *criollo* identity and its definition can roughly be summarized as a longing for a collectively imagined colonial past.

Massive migration of Andean peasants into the urban areas in the 1930's, and later on in the 1950's and 1960's exacerbated "criollo nostalgia" as their presence threatened with the "Andeanization" of Lima. Middle and upper class criollos revalorized and reclaimed the once stigmatized Afro-Peruvian art as part of mainstream criollo popular culture. "The reclamation of colonial Black dances became a way for criollos to symbolically revisit the Lima that preceded Andean migration" (23). As a result, in 1956 José Durand presented Afro-Peruvian art with his artistic company Pancho Fierro for the first time in the prestigious Municipal Theater of Lima. Feldman describes how Durand's "criollo nostalgia" influenced –and was the basis for– his recreation of a black Peruvian past. In the Pancho Fierro show, "song-and-dance numbers depicted blacks in times of slavery, working and playing in the rural fields and urban streets of Peru" (30).

A useful topic in this chapter is Durand's staging of the street masked dance *Son de los Diablos* (the "song of the devils" or devils dance) as an example of Durand's use of ethnographic methods to revive Afro-Peruvian art. Durand combined his expertise as both scholar and folklorist to reconstruct this supposedly forgotten dance. He conducted a thorough study of early 19th century Pancho Fierro watercolor paintings depicting the *Son de los Diablos*, as well as consulted written descriptions of the dance. He then reconstructed the music and dance with the aid of guitar player Vicente Vásquez and three former devil dancers who had participated in the last group to dance in Lima's carnival. The overall description Feldman makes of Durand as a white upper class intellectual criollo and the social circle that attended the Pancho Fierro events, helps recognize the historical criticism and debate surrounding Durand's hand in the staging of Afro-Peruvian art, and how he influenced future versions of this art.

The second chapter is dedicated to Victoria Santa Cruz, without question the most important and intriguing character in the creation of a distinctive Afro-Peruvian repertoire in the 1960's. A useful contribution in this chapter is Feldman's interpretation of Victoria Santa Cruz' "memory project" as revealed through her intricate theory of "ancestral memory." Feldman describes this complex idea as Victoria's connection to "a

geographically unspecific link to a generalized sense of African ancestry (versus a specific ancestor) that [Victoria] believes she discovered through the vehicle of her body and dance. In this sense, the body itself represents a kind of ‘Africa’ where lost ancestral memories are stored” (67).

Essentially, Victoria Santa Cruz used ancestral memory to recover and teach dance and music. While this theory presupposes that all black people have an innate sense of rhythm thereby supporting stereotypical assumptions that rhythm is an essential quality among black people, Feldman argues that “the beauty and the danger of the idea of ancestral memory is that it deftly disables criticism in the same way devout religious belief can never be ‘wrong’” (69). Many Afro-Peruvian artists indeed use ancestral memory in their artistic endeavors, as Feldman also asserts. They have also resignified symbols as icons of Afro-Peruvian culture (e.g. thick lips, bulgy eyes, and wide noses). The problem arises when these symbols and lyrics that support Victoria Santa Cruz’ ancestral memory (such as “to get down to the rhythm of the drum, you have to be black”¹) are staged for an audience who may hide or disguise racist attitudes, characteristic of a large part of Peruvian society. While the artists’ goals may be different these symbols promote and continue to perpetuate negative stereotypes, a topic, I believe, deserving much more attention.

This chapter also helps clarify an ever present debate about the current folkloric version of the *zamacueca* dance as a choreography invented by Victoria Santa Cruz. José Durand explained during a conference on *marinera limeña* in 1987 in Lima, that *zamacueca* and *marinera limeña* are the same thing, an argument supported by Augusto Ascuez as cited in Feldman’s book (76).² Piano musical transcriptions of *zamacuecas* by Rosa Mercedes Ayarza found in the research conducted by Peruvian ethnomusicologist Renato Neyra and Feldman’s description of the

¹ Victoria Santa Cruz wrote a “*zamacueca*” that says “Pa’ gozar con el ritmo del tambor, negro tienes que ser.” Feldman cites these lyrics in her discussion about Victoria’s placement of ancestral memory in the black body (68).

² In his 1899 book *Rasgos y Pluma*, Peruvian journalist Abelardo Gamarra “el Tunante” baptized a popular coastal handkerchief mixed-couple dance “*Marinera*.” This music and dance genre had traveled from Peru to the southern cone with its original name *zamacueca* and it had returned to Peru with the Peruvian-Chilean war under the name of *chilena*. Gamarra chose the name *marinera* to honor the marines who fought at this war (Vallejos, 2000: 21).

zamacueca based on her research (74-75) suggest musical structures and choreographies that support the close similarities between zamacueca and present day marinera limeña. The confusion lies in existing beliefs that the present day zamacueca is an old dance that was rescued or revived by Victoria Santa Cruz. During an interview with Victoria in 2004 I questioned her about this debate. Unfortunately her answer was evasive and her perspective unclear. Feldman's exploration of Victoria Santa Cruz' ancestral memory helps clarify the process by which Victoria constructed the dance known today as zamacueca and also aids in understanding its believed "ancientness."

Internationally famous Afro-Peruvian poet Nicomedes Santa Cruz (Victoria's brother) is the focus of the third chapter. Feldman describes Nicomedes as an "archaeologist of black Peru" and as "the sole voice of Peruvian *negritude*," a literary movement of black poets and intellectuals in the 1940's and 1950's. Nicomedes Santa Cruz was an intellectual, a researcher, a composer, singer and dancer; but it was mainly through the *décima de pie forzado* (forced foot *décima* consisting of four octosyllabic ten-line stanzas) that Nicomedes Santa Cruz best transmitted his memory projects. He used the *décima* to protest racial discrimination, express anti-imperialist and revolutionary sentiments, and to address contemporary national and international issues.

A highlight in this chapter is Feldman's in-depth analysis of Nicomedes' theory on the *lundú* and the resulting criticism it sparked both towards Nicomedes himself and his theory. The theory is based on a genealogy that traces the origins of criollo dance genres to an African couple dance called *lundú*—from *lundú* to *lundu* found in the Atlantic diaspora, to *landó* in Peru, and to marinera in contemporary criollo music—concluding therefore that criollo music was as much African as European in its origins. According to Feldman, this theory is an example of what she calls "Black Pacific double consciousness" characteristic of the Afro-Peruvian community: "it simultaneously maintains Black ties to Peruvian criollo culture, promotes a strategically essentialist and Afrocentric vision of premodern African origins, and embraces kinship with the Black Atlantic" (103). The *lundú* theory has been used against

Nicomedes to criticize him mainly as “essentialist” and for proposing a theory with no accurate foundation. In any case, as Feldman concludes, “[m]ore important than the credibility of Nicomedes’ argument is how it affected the future racialization of music and dance, especially the rebirth of the Peruvian landó” (109). Today the landó is believed to be the most direct link to African ancestry.

Chapter four deals with the biggest icon of Afro-Peruvian culture: world renowned dance troop *Perú Negro*. Feldman identifies *Perú Negro* as the second stage of the Afro-Peruvian revival as this group “folklorized” (stylized and refined even more) the “folklore” that José Durand and the Santa Cruz siblings had staged (128-131)³. A crucial topic in *Perú Negro*’s history documented in this book is the Peruvian government’s hand in this group’s success and the resulting consequences. While *Perú Negro* received strong support from the military government through steady job opportunities and performance spaces, Feldman notes that then president Velasco’s government-sponsored nationalistic memory project of “folklore” helped frame Peruvian blackness in the colonial past. *Perú Negro*’s performances enacted “premodern ‘local color’ in order to counteract the popularity of foreign (especially U.S.) music and dance styles” (131). *Perú Negro* and their colonial discourse is not only considered the best and most accurate representation of Afro-Peruvian culture but this group continues to inform other folkloric troops and audiences about “traditional” Afro-Peruvian culture.

Feldman explores the “Perú Negro sound” and more particularly a song from their repertoire, “Canto a Elegua,” to illustrate how Afro-Peruvian artists borrowed elements from the black Atlantic to emphasize an “African” heritage in Afro-Peruvian music. This topic is explored further in Feldman’s article “The Black Pacific: Cuban and Brazilian Echoes in the Afro-Peruvian Revival”⁴.

Tourism and staged authenticity are the main topics in chapter five. Feldman argues how not only locals but especially revival artists and

³ The concept of “folklore” and its coexisting meanings is central in this chapter. Feldman offers a thorough analysis worth revising.

⁴ “The Black Pacific: Cuban and Brazilian Echoes in the Afro-Peruvian Revival,” *Ethnomusicology* 49, no. 2 (2005): 206-231.

scholars contributed in bringing attention to and inventing the legend of Chincha. Chincha is a region located in the *departamento* (state) of Ica, which competes as one of the two centers of “true” black culture (the other one is Cañete). This chapter expands on rock guitarist and composer Miki González' participation in the creation of “Chincha” as a tourist center through his fusion of Afro-Peruvian and rock music. She also analyzes problems in Gonzales' recording “Akundun” and live performances, and presents counter arguments to these issues (e.g. hyper sexuality presented in live shows by Miki Gonzales vs. how some Afro-Peruvian artists celebrate hyper sexuality in black dance).

A useful topic around the ever present contradictions of tourism is Feldman's application of MacCannell's (1989 [1976]) binary notion of the front (show) and back (real) spaces, and six other hypothetical spaces of social encounters to the tourist experience. After describing her experience attending a *yunza* celebration (a community ritual dance practiced at the end of carnival) Feldman asks which the “back” region is: “the traditional *yunza* danced primarily by tourists or the subsequent party in which Chincha residents danced to music styles popular throughout Latin America and the United States”? (e.g. salsa). She concludes that since the “natives” in this region experience both front and back regions as a normal part of their daily lives, “both the *yunza* (including its ever-present tourist factor) and the dance party are authentic cultural expressions of their lived realities” (192).

In the final chapter, Feldman uses “immigrant nostalgia” and “cosmopolitan world music” to contrast two different diasporic reinventions of Afro-Peruvian music: the introduction of Afro-Peruvian music into the “world music” scene through Afro-Peruvian singer Susana Baca, and cultural preservation efforts through music among Peruvian immigrants in the U.S. Susana Baca was considered non-traditional and therefore unpopular in the local Afro-Peruvian artistic scene. Her repertoire consists of poetry arranged to music and her music accompaniment differs from the standard in both instrumentation and musical arrangements. Pop music artist David Byrne “discovered” Susana Baca in the late 1990's, and promoted her through his record label Luaka

Bop. Not concerned with “authenticity” Byrne found in Baca unique aesthetic qualities that attracted him ever since he heard a recording of Baca in New York. Susana Baca is now known by international audiences mainly in the U.S. and Europe.

Meanwhile, locals and U.S. immigrant Peruvians whose effort in preserving their culture included recreations of *peñas* (Peruvian night clubs) and Afro-Peruvian dance competitions, were questioning ‘why Susana Baca and not Eva Ayllón?’ Eva Ayllón is the Afro-Peruvian singer most venerated by these audiences. She often tours around the U.S. to perform for Peruvian immigrant communities although this is unknown by U.S. audiences. According to Feldman, immigrants’ musical preference with more “typical” Peruvian aesthetics is invisible to U.S. world music consumers who “relegate local versions of ethnic music to obscurity and prefer the ‘confusing pleasure’ that causes unfamiliar music, yet familiar enough to qualify as ‘world music’” (217-220), such as the music of Susana Baca. Eva Ayllón, however, does not only perform the typical Peruvian repertoire. Feldman points that “the legacy of the Afro-Peruvian revival’s celebration of negritude was music and dance that essentializes stereotyped qualities associated with blackness” present in Ayllón’s stage performances. Therefore, “Eva Ayllón’s performances are apparently much harder to translate for non-Peruvian audiences in the United States, just as Susana Baca’s idiosyncratic arrangements and singing style are displeasing to many Peruvians...for members of the Peruvian immigrant community who are accustomed to [stereotyped qualities in] this type of performance of Peruvian blackness, the absence of such overt signifiers ‘whitens’ the music of Susana Baca” (257-258).

In her conclusion Feldman reflects on how she went to Peru to document Afro-Peruvian’s performance practices in the present. What she found was “an enormous dose of the past,” and that although it is believed that black Peruvians have no documented history, their past is everywhere. Their past is recreated through the memory projects of the different Afro-Peruvian actors detailed in this book. As a result, she notes, present day Afro-Peruvian performance is a cultural memory of the history of black Peru, a product of the present.

The concept of *memory* applied to performance is indeed provoking and Feldman's *memory projects* is an interesting tool to explain what has led Afro-Peruvian art to be contextualized in the past. The fascinating history told here could have been complemented with factual information that would have helped contextualize the population at hand. A map of Peru and Afro-Peruvian communities, and population charts are omitted. These would have helped situate the Afro-Peruvian community in the larger geographical and socio political contexts; factors which also influenced the meaning and use of "blackness" and related terms in Peru throughout history, not investigated here. At the same time Feldman's diplomatic sensibilities left me wondering how she perceived the problems involved in Afro-Peruvian's portrayal of blackness. For example she successfully targets problematic stereotypes suggested in Miki González' recording "Akundun," but she also reminds the reader of how some Afro-Peruvian artists celebrate and defend as theirs, those same stereotyped characteristics; she recognizes problems in Victoria Santa Cruz' theory of ancestral memory, but argues against criticism; she discusses extensively how Susana Baca became a world music artist as an alternative to local versions of Afro-Peruvian art, without problematizing the way in which Baca and her music have been packaged, including problematic content in CD booklets (e.g. an uncaptioned photo of nearly naked individuals that may suggest an attempt to exotize and essentialize the black body). In addition, I believe Juanchy Vasquez' comments that black dances had not disappeared in Peru at the time of Durand (45-46), and that not everything has been invented (261-262) are not stressed enough. The reiteration that everything was and is constantly invented may be contributing to the inaccurate historical belief in the "disappearance" of black Peruvians and their traditions. Her response or lack of response to these and other issues to some extent normalizes certain problems, and suggests that there is no one questioning these issues. As a result it ignores the efforts of those Afro-Peruvians, artists, scholars, and activists who are indeed questioning and fighting to solve these historical problems.

This book is an excellent source and I strongly recommend it to students and scholars interested in ethnomusicology, memory, invention of

traditions, dance, performance, African diaspora, race, identity, Peru, and Latin America.

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