The Iberian *Villancico de Negro*: Between Parody, Cooptation, and Agency

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Abstract: The villancico de negro *is a musical genre that pervaded the Iberian Peninsula and its colonies from the 16th to 18th centuries.* Villancicos de negro *were pieces written by white composers that depict Black people. In most cases, the Black character was made fun of and represented in a ridiculous manner. In this article, I examine the use of parody in white representations of Black people, which tell us about white imaginaries around Blackness, and how the racial lines were materialized through sound. The construction of whiteness truly surfaces in negotiations around agency in the representation of Black sound.*

Résumé : Le genre musical du villancico de negro *a imprégné la péninsule ibérique et ses colonies du XVIe au XVIIIe siècles. Les* villancicos de negro *étaient des morceaux composés par des Blancs pour décrire des Noirs. Dans la plupart des cas, le Noir était tourné en dérision et présenté sous un jour ridicule. Dans cet article, j'examine l'usage de la parodie dans les représentations que les Blancs faisaient des Noirs, qui nous renseignent sur l'imaginaire des Blancs à propos des Noirs, et sur la façon dont les lignes raciales se matérialisaient au moyen du son. La construction de la blanchité se laisse réellement percevoir dans les négociations de l'agentivité dans la représentation des sonorités noires.*

> *Eu sá Capitaó*
> *dos Pleto de Angola*
> *Tempelai esse bitangola,*
> *e fazeime huma Rojaó*
> *De Gugulugá*
> *de Tambalalam*
> *de glande folia*
> *qe cos fessa cos leglia*
> *me say polas oyo*
> *mia colaçam*

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I am the captain
of the Blacks from Angola.
Tune up my viol,
and prepare me a feast.
By Gugulugá!
By Tambalalam!
For this crazyness,
because of partying
and because of happiness,
My heart explodes through
my eyes![1]

("*Bacião, Flunando, Flancico*")[2]

"Gulumbá," "Zuguambé," "Tarará," and "Tambalagumbá" are song names increasingly found on recordings and concert programs in the context of historically informed performance practice — or Early Music (the term I use throughout this article) — incorporating repertoires from Latin countries, either European or American. Although these *villancicos de negro* are essentially racist, reinforcing common stereotypes of Black people in terms of both their imagined musicality and their supposed speech deficiency, many Early Music ensembles play this repertoire regularly, paying little attention, at least in appearance, to the racial implications of performing such pieces.[3]

Found all over the countries in the Iberian Peninsula and their colonial territories from the 16th to 18th centuries, villancicos are short and ludic pieces in the vernacular — usually Spanish or Portuguese — sung in a Catholic religious context, most often on Christmas Eve. A large subset of the villancicos, called *negro*, *negrilla*, or *guineo*, portray Black people in a caricatured manner, supposedly imitating their dances, speech, and attitude. Described by Baker (2008b) as the minstrelsy of the times, they were indeed miniatures of Black representation made by composers of European descent. This article discusses the characteristics of this racialized representation in music, how it was performed by white musicians for mixed-race audiences in order to draw and control subjective racial lines by using burlesque and parody, and how the repertoire may have been used by Blacks to recuperate some cultural agency. What was implied by the "negro" label? What were its musical, textual, and ideological features?

Since the earliest musicological studies of the villancico de negro (Stevenson 1968), scholars have sought to uncover some of the repertoire's possible meanings. Meanwhile, contemporary musicians are "re-performing"

villancicos, drawing on their own understandings of the repertoire and its context.

I argue that the villancico de negro of the 17th century offered a particular space in which the concept of race could be constructed. Combining music, parody, mimicry, and comedy, *villancico de remedo* disseminated racialized hierarchies to the masses. Historically, the racialization of sound in the Latin world was largely informed by the legacy of villancico practices. As a result, Early Music performances of villancicos de negro continue to present problematic representations of race.

This paper's goal is not to present a complete history of the villancico de negro in the context of the Iberian world. Rather, I propose to examine the villancico de negro and the parodic effect of its Black characters using contemporary readings of race and representation, mainly from the same geographical and cultural space. More precisely, I will relate the villancico de negro to the white gaze on Blackness and music in the 20th century. Additionally, I am preferentially drawing on scholarship produced outside centres of power such as the US, and, when possible, giving priority to the most recent publications written in Spanish and Portuguese. I wish to render relevant literature in Latin languages accessible to an anglophone audience, as well as promote new dialogues between recent scholarship on race studies and music scholarship on colonial history. As a white scholar myself, I am not aiming to produce commentaries about what Blackness is or was, or to uncover Black people's musical practices from the past. Rather, I wish to use music scholarship to expose ways in which white people have, in the earliest years of colonialism, constructed a narrow idea of what constitutes Black music and promulgated this invention as a truth, with long lasting impacts on white views of Blackness.

After briefly presenting the religious villancico as a general category, I will examine how the villancicos de negro are a representation of the burlesque as a temporary inversion of the social order. Moreover, a parodic effect is attained when a certain sense of realism allows identification with elements that mimic real life. The villancico was one of the tools used by those with religious and political power to maintain the subaltern in an essentialized, stigmatized position. We will then see that, through subtle negotiations around sound and representation, these powers were also legitimized thanks to the success of the villancico with large audiences. Finally, we will observe how those in power used the Black person as a stylized and caricatured character to aesthetically serve this purpose, and how performances of villancicos de negro eventually reinforce or subvert assumptions around this character.

Particularities and Functions of the Religious Villancico

In order to examine the place of the villancico de negro in the larger context of Western art music, it proves useful to inquire into a social history of the villancico genre. Paul Laird asserts that, if it was to be compared to another genre of Western art music, the number of para-liturgical (or religious) villancico would surpass that of the Italian *Madrigale* (1992). It is surprising that, until the beginning of the 21st century, little scholarly attention has been given to this repertoire (Stevenson 1968; Stevenson et al. 1976; Snow 1993),[4] which remains only rarely studied. However, in recent years, an increasing number of musicologists are investigating this genre, including Portuguese, Spanish, and Latin American scholars (Knighton and Torrente 2007; Swadley 2014; Tello et al. 2018; Morales Abril 2013a; Davies 2011; Illari 2007; Swiadon 2002).

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the term villancico, or *vilancete* in Portuguese, referred to a poetic style that was generally sung and characterized by its metric form, also known as *letrilla* (Sanches 2018: 97). In the 17th century, villancico referred to any song that was performed in a devotional context (liturgical or para-liturgical) by professional musicians and sung in a Romance language (Torrente 2016: 433). Its form, metre, and structure may vary depending on the context, place, and time of its composition (503). The modern use of the term "villancico" is an anachronistic modern label, typically referring to compositions that were defined earlier by different names, such as *cançonetas, romances, pastorelas, ensaladas, a lo divino* or *tonos*, all displaying subtle poetic forms of Hispanic literary expression.

Religious villancicos were incorporated into Christian feasts as a way of paraphrasing the matins in the vernacular to help illiterate congregants understand the Latin text and follow the narrative of biblical events (Hurtado 2006). Thus, this tradition has served two functions, both of which directed to individuals from lower social strata: rendering the long nocturne celebrations more accessible and understandable on the one hand, while making them more attractive and less repetitive on the other hand. It is no surprise, then, that the villancico has had a crucial importance in the Iberian colonies, where it consolidated the affective relationship between society and the church. Moreover, villancico lyrics further helped to maintain a status quo that kept the Creole elites in power. The fact that this musical genre could be found spread over several continents in the Iberian world, combined with a continuous anxious desire on the part of church officials to hire villancico composers for their religious celebrations all through the year, indicates the real importance of this genre, which was as much political and ideological as aesthetic.[5]

Additionally, the sub-category villancico de remedo (Morales Abril

2013a)[6] presents specific ethnic characters that do not necessarily have a rural origin, as might be assumed by the etymological meaning of "villano" referred to by Laird (1992), but are rather associated with lower racial or social positions that have had little presence in the hispanophone and lusophone spheres of power and literacy. The villancico de remedo theatrically mimics the languages and attitudes of subaltern and marginal classes, cultures, or ethnicities. In that sense, it is a parody of the non-lettered social classes set to music, the comical effect being based on the exaggeration of the social inabilities of the characters. The "Black African" is the character who recurs the most often in this repertoire. A specific subset of the villancico de remedo, the villancico de negro, refers to songs representing Black people.

The Burlesque in the Villancico de Negro

Villancicos were sung mostly around Christmas and Corpus Christi celebrations, as well as during other important religious festivities. Although their performance is not limited to any particular Christian festival, they can be understood as precursors to carnivalesque forms of popular expression (Bakhtin 1968) because they appear in moments of the liturgy where things could be upside down: a Black person could be white, the rich could be poor, and a little baby could be a king.

While defined by their inversion of the normal order, villancicos de remedo almost always depict scenes inspired by the Bible, fulfilling their function of illustrating the Roman Liturgy. In the villancicos de negro, the Nativity is the most commonly represented scene, usually centred on a group of people of African descent paying homage to the newborn Baby Jesus, with all their musical instruments and dances. This creates a comical situation (from an elite perspective) by giving the lower social echelons the honour of announcing the Nativity's miracle to the rest of society. For example, the Berkeley Manuscripts (Labrador and DiFranco 2004) present a dialogue between *negros* and *blancos*, where Blacks are showing the way to Bethlehem to incredulous whites.

> *Blancos:*
> *¿Dónde va la gente negra*
> *tan de noche como es,*
> *con tanta grita y ruydo*
> *que no dan en qué entender? ¿Dó caminan los tiznados,*
> *a qué parte van sus pies? Respondan, señores negros, sepamos dónde y*
> *a qué.*

Negros:
¿Qué quere branco sabe? Samon loca de prazé,
y bamo a Belé con fauta y rabé, y la guitarriya, sonaxa y gaytiya, ca parirá vna moreniya
vn branquiyo que Dios e.

Whites:
Where are the Blacks going to, on such a dark night, with all these shouts and noises that we cannot understand? Where are the smutty ones going to, where are their feet carrying them? Respond, Black gentlemen, so that we know where to and what for.

Blacks:
What does the white one want to know? We are crazily joyful, and we are going to Bethlehem with flutes and fiddles, guitars, *sonaxa* [jingles] and gaitas [bagpipes]. There is a dark-skinned lady giving birth to a white babe who is God.[7]
(Labrador and DiFranco 2004: 182)

In this text, the Virgin is depicted as *moreniya* (black-skinned); still, she gives birth to a white infant, a reversion of the racial order recurrent in the villancicos. Representing the Virgin as Black creates some degree of confusion. In the same vein, we can see the white Jesus depicted as a descendant of the Black race:

Juro aquece niño siquito: Aunque nace poco branquito turo somo noso parente.
No tenemo branco gente...
Esa noche branco seremo. Oh Jesu qué risa tenemo!

I swear that this small baby, even if he was somehow born white, we are all related. We don't fear white people ... This night we're all going to be white. Ah Jesus, this is so much fun![8]
(Fernández, "*Ese Rigo Re Repente*")[9]

The distortion of the hegemonic social order, as extreme as it must have seemed at the time, could not extend beyond certain boundaries. Although the carnivalesque is often bound up with the grotesque, which includes sexuality and immorality (Bakhtin 1968), such themes were subject to censorship by the clergy since villancicos were performed in or near churches. Villancicos could

not present any language directly contrary to Christian ethics. Therefore, in a spirit closer to the burlesque, authors incorporated grotesque effects by referring to different types of socially unacceptable behaviours or inconceivable situations — such as a Black virgin giving birth to a white Jesus — without deviating too much from the Church's imposed morality. Tinhorão argues that because Black people were not recognized as legal subjects in colonial societies, the Black character was more likely to project an immorality that white people could not afford to express for themselves (1988). For example, the song "*Antonia, Flasiquiya*" portrays a delegation of Blacks who are hungover after having drunk too much heading to Bethlehem.[10]

Parodic Realism

Most villancicos de negro portray Black characters as joyous, naive, inclined to dance and play music, genuinely religious, and with the recurrent tendency of misusing the dominant Spanish or Portuguese language (Alcántara Rojas 2016). The clear objective of the villancico de remedo is to create a comical effect as well as to provoke basic emotions, such as the maternal instinct when referencing Baby Jesus (Sanches 2018: 336). Its rhetoric oscillates between direct ridicule, tenderness, and nonsense.

A debate amongst those who study the villancicos de remedo pertains to the realistic aspects of the musical and theatrical representations of the racially marked characters (Stevenson 1968; Swiadon 2002). On the one hand, Frenk argues that the parodic effect of such an upside-down representation is most successful when resonating with a recognizable reality, and when exaggerating or troubling a pre-existing context (2002). Frenk's position is that in order to produce the comical, it is necessary that the product (the parody) resonate with a particular cultural background, or realistic elements of it. On the other hand, Lipski rationalizes the Latin American villancico de negro, and by extension any 17th-century negrilla, as mere imitations of the 16th-century stock character of "the negro" found in the satiric theatre of Gil Vicente or Lope de Vega (2005). In other words, "the negro" in 16th-century theatre is a historic stock character that reproduces stable, stereotypical elements — emphasizing corporality (sexuality, dance, vices) and immorality (thefts or lies) — more than it resonates with contemporary realities (Belo 2013: 15).

But not all agree with this homogenized understanding of the *língua de preto* or *habla de negro* (Black language), as differences vary according to time, place, and types of performances. Swadley, for instance, sees language in Portugal as less stylized than in New Spain, partly because the social place of Blacks was

different in these two historical and geographical contexts (2014: 139-145). In the monastery of Santa Cruz in Coimbra (Portugal), the relationship between the monk-composers of the convent and the Black community may have been relatively close. Luis and Estudante conducted a linguistic comparison between the lingua de preto speech in Gil Vicente's 16th-century courtly theatre and the texts of villancicos de negro from the Coimbra Santa Cruz monastery, dating from the mid-17th century (2016). They found that although these texts shared a lot of common characteristics — especially phonetic distortions — the grammar of the Coimbra manuscripts is much closer to the Afro-Portuguese Creole still spoken today in some parts of lusophone Africa than to the linguistic clichés of Gil Vicente from a century earlier. They conclude that the composers from Coimbra were most probably attentive to the development of a local Afro-Portuguese Creole language spoken by some Black communities in Portugal and its American colonies.

In addition, certain supposedly "nonsense" parts of the vilancicos de negro from Coimbra may have actual meanings in particular African languages. Armin Schengler argues that the "nonsense" lyrics *cambarito mana mundele tota*," in the refrain of the vilancico "*Plimo Plimo*," is recognizable as Kikongo, a language found in an area between Congo and Angola, as noted in the translation below (qtd. in Sanches 2018: 343). Interestingly, the Kikongo language was known and spoken at Coimbra University during the 17th century, and the probability that the composers or authors of this song actually knew the language themselves is very high. Besides, the political content implied by the text may well have been in line with their own views:

> *Prima Magalena, se saber bayamo*
> *que esse nozo Rey não sá Caseano*
> *També coa menino viva Zoão quarto; que turo lo pleto su Amigo samo.*
> *Cambaritomanamundele tota! Casupe! Casupe! He, he, he!*

> Cousin Madalena / let us dance, for, as you know, this King of ours / is no longer a Castilian. / Together with the Child, long live João IV / for all of us Blacks are his friends! / Ranks, prepare to follow the white Lord! Shout "stand"! Shout "stand"! Eh! Eh! Eh![12]
> (Sanches 2017: 95)

Here, the "white Lord" of the last verse may refer both to Jesus and to the new King of Portugal, Joao IV (r.1640-56), who represented the "salvation" of Portugal after its political submission to Spain between 1580 and 1640. Portugal had already won its political independence at the time this song was

composed, but the cultural and ideological battle between the supporters of the Spanish Crown and the Portuguese nationalists was ongoing (Lopes 2011: 283; Sanches 2018: 342).[13]

Another example from the Coimbra archives that proves the possible solidarity between the composers and the Black community is the villancico de negro "*Bacião, Flunando, Flancio*," which ends with the words in lingua de preto "*forrai os Pletyos, siolo zezu*." Sanches translates this lingua de preto sentence as "free the Blacks, Lord Jesus" (2018: 263). During this period, heated debates about the legitimacy of the slave trade were taking place at the University of Coimbra, in which the monks of the Santa Cruz convent most probably took an active part. However, the theme of Jesus or the Virgin Mary bringing freedom to Blacks also appears in other places. The first strophe of "*Apalta tula Guinea*," for example, written in Guatemala in the 17th century, reads "*Agola tulus las neglo no palesemos vindira, qui ya tulus sam lible, pulque nació noso Plima*" ("Now all us Blacks don't look sold, here we are all free, because our Cousin was born") (Guerrero, "Apalta").[14]

Likewise, two later texts written by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in Mexico, "Bueno está en Latin" (1685) and "En esto entraron dos negras" (1686), contain references to Black peoples' suffering and hard living conditions, which could indicate the author's investment in their cause (Vodozova 1996: 84). All these sympathetic references could be read as proof of a real interaction between members of religious orders and the Black community, translated musically.

Essentializing the Subaltern

Simultaneously, it is important to problematize the idea of a genuine musical hybridity, and the assumption that Spanish-educated composers "naturally" incorporated the expressions of Black communities into their sacred music. While denying any possible Black influence in the composition of the negrillas would be excessive, villancicos do not offer a straightforward reflection of African slaves' musical practices. One may question Labrador and DiFranco's proposition that villancico composers and librettists went around the city, noting down popular musical themes and incorporating them into their own music (2004).

John Swadley insists that the villancicos de negro were "an elitist satire on the imagined speech of a subaltern group" that "served another elitist end, the reduction to a state of ridiculousness of a racial group whose perceived physical vitality was felt to be a threat," as a "protective psychological

mechanism" (2014: 135, 138). Similarly, Omar Morales Abril argues that the representation of the Other in the villancico de remedo maintains a shared assumption that the Black person (or sometimes, the Indigenous person [indio]) who is mimicked is essentially inferior and subaltern: "[L]anguage as a serious and correct communication tool had to be Castilian, while regional languages were tolerated as a means for entertainment" (Morales Abril 2013a: 10). Serious discourse would never be expressed in anything other than hegemonic Spanish or Portuguese.

In addition to discrediting the subaltern through language, the systematic representation of Black people as poor is a way to organize intersubjectivities around the assumption that the non-white individual's place in society is essentially marginal. As yet another way to promote strife among Black communities, some texts introduce a subjective comparison between Africans of different ethnic groups. For example, a Guinean character in the villancico "Ese Rigo Re Repente" sings about a "very black and ugly" person from Angola:

> *Vamo negro de Guinea a lo pesebrito sola. No vamos negro de Angola que se turo negla fea*

> Let's go to the Crib with the Blacks of Guinea only. The Blacks from Angola should not go, as they are all black and bad-looking (Fernández, "Ese Rigo re Repente")

What is the purpose of presenting two distinct ethnicities from Africa in opposition to each other? It is highly probable that such division existed in the context of 17th-century Mexico, and that the text would make enough sense to the general population to provoke laughter. To use this ethnic opposition, especially when promoting one party over the other and trivializing the situation, also serves to demotivate any urge to solve interethnic struggles while paradoxically homogenizing the Black population as one group, in which any concept of distinct sub-groups is "silly."

In his work on the coloniality of power, Aníbal Quijano shows that the importance of the unconscious in the reproduction of a colonial order appears precisely in the construction of a universal sense of subjectivity (2000). The value of white people is taken for granted, while the subaltern position of other races is inculcated in their subjectivity and reinforced at a pre-rational level. This is what the villancico does to some extent in insisting on the idea of a "natural" lower social position for Black and Indigenous people (Morales Abril 2013a: 16). Geoffrey Baker argues that by caricaturing

Black people and depicting them as barbarous, uneducated, unable to speak properly, and more inclined to dance and drink than to work, composers and poets constructed a strong binary in which the European is seen as good and the African as bad (2007). One should keep in mind that the population of the time consisted primarily of mixed-race people who would not have identified with the strict category of the bozal (Black person born in Africa and recently displaced to the Americas). Rather, they would be Afro-descendants born in the Americas, or would belong to one of the more than 30 categories of mixed-race individuals that officially existed at the time, navigating between white, Black, and Indigenous identities across a strict division of racial labelling that was prevalent at the time. Through the repeated and exaggerated representation of Black people as naive and childish, Spaniards were attempting to manipulate the internal subjectivities of these mixed-race people so that they would inescapably aspire to whiteness and the presumably civilized identity associated with it, rather than identifying with the Black community, depicted as unredeemingly barbaric (Baker 2007: 400-408). Baker proposes that, as the composers were Spaniards and the audience "white," villancicos de negro could be considered as "the blackface minstrelsy of its time" (2008b: 442). Nonetheless, whiteness in the Spanish colonies did not refer to the same concept as in post-abolitionist America. In New Spain, a racially based supremacy was enforced at the legal level, but it was nevertheless also fluid and traversable by whomever could "pass," or represent themselves as corresponding to white social standards (Ramos-Kittrell 2016). As such, whiteness as an aspirational goal was not unreachable, but it implied a total cultural identification and a negation of cultural Blackness. Villancicos de negro served to reinforce this cultural and identificatory absolutism.

While official written records only mention Spanish or European (white) composers, non-white musicians working "in the shadows" may also have been at least as active. The demand for the villancicos was so high that it is possible to imagine that *maestros de capilla* (chapel masters) would ask favours from musicians who were brilliant composers but unable to accede to official posts because of their race. For instance, the composer Juan de Vera in early 17th-century Puebla was never promoted to a maestro de capilla post, despite being highly appreciated and prolific. One possible interpretation is that this musician was Black, that he had been first brought to the cathedral as a slave, and that this condition was categorically impeding his legal employment at such a high grade (Morales Abril 2010).

Mass Communication and the Legitimization
of Power through Sound

As we have seen, villancicos de negro were created in a social context where Black music was present and palpable, and where the Black racial category was subjectively associated with music, dance, and fun (Tinhorão 1988). The active role of the Black *cofradias* (brotherhoods) in religious processions demonstrates that there was a high permeability between groups of musicians of all races (160-164). Christmas and Corpus Christi celebrations, as well as feasts for saints, were moments in the liturgical year during which the Church would attempt to integrate different groups in the community.[15] The theatrical, accessible, and loud villancico characters encouraged massive, collective participation. In his book about colonial Cusco (in what is now Peru), Baker explains that the parishes of the city were racially segregated; Indigenous people had their own churches and communal religious zones, mostly at some distance from the cathedral (2008a). Still, there were some exceptions to these geographic segregations, as large processions would attract the Indigenous population to the city centre in order to participate in top-down, centrally conceived festivities (see also Baker 2002). By contrast, white elites would hardly have crossed these imaginary boundaries to venture into the racialized parishes (Baker 2008a). Understanding the one-sided aspect of racial mobility in a city like Cusco helps us grasp the importance of the theatrical-musical performances composed by Spaniards (both immigrants and locally born *criollos*) and potentially heard by the whole population. A typical feature of villancicos is their introduction by a preparatory acclamation, which implies that they are sharing the news of the birth of Christ and, in this context, prepares the audience for the staged "pilgrimage to the crib of the newborn" (Castro 2016: 15). In such large and racially mixed gatherings, the villancicos can be understood as a sort of broadcasting tool in the hands of the clergy. From a performative perspective, the representation of biblical scenes broadcast in music could well have served to link religious narratives with contemporary political events. As most of the population was willing to attend the staged villancicos, they provided a key opportunity to anchor ideologies that promoted and reinforced the established social order. By introducing theatre, dance, and sometimes costumes into their representations, villancico composers and performers were activating multi-sensorial communication in order to "speak" at various levels, and therefore better reach audiences. But it is especially in the villancicos de remedo that the comical component came to secure the participation of the listener in an active process of laughter, expectation, and surprise.

Given that the messages embedded in the villancicos were so important for the functioning of society, and for the prosperity of the European elites, what

did the Spanish and Portuguese do to ensure the music was going to be heard and listened to? Why would subaltern classes watch a performance in which they were caricatured as ridiculous, uneducated, and naive? The show had to be presented as inclusive if it was to be the most effective. If the 17th- and 18th-century villancicos de negro presented a Black character different from that in the 16th-century Gil Vicente theatre or Lope de Vega theatre, which was essentially spiteful and degrading, it was also different from the cruel, non-empathetic characterizations of Black people that appeared later in minstrelsy created specifically for white audiences. By contrast, the representation of Black characters in Iberian villancico de remedo seems tender, even affectionate, and offers at least a degree of empathy.

As such, the villancico de negro presents all the elements necessary to foster identification.[16] Without this potential for identification, the whole instrumentalization (in the figurative sense) of the villancico as a mass communication tool would fail its purpose. An overly direct and transparent dismissal of the subaltern would foster opposition and resistance. Instead, top-down attempts to manipulate subjectivities aim to remain bearable to their targets and offer a pleasurable interaction. In occasionally sidestepping more typical church practices, such as the polyphonic setting of Latin texts, which may have been seen as elitist and arcane by most of the population, the possibility of hegemonic power being accepted and appreciated by the masses is increased. The study of the villancicos de negro demonstrates that the Spanish and Portuguese were very much aware of the potential reach of the tools they created, polished, and improved over the centuries (Illari 2007: 413).

By systematically representing a Black person in his most devotional and religious essence, thereby correlating the festive temperament of the Black (Tinhorão 1988) and Christian rituals, the elites reinforced the ideas of shared religion, shared values, and the acculturation of Black people into a Eurocentric society. Recurrently, the birth of Baby Jesus is used to claim an era of equality among Blacks and whites — despite a very different reality — presented as an aspiration of both Blacks and (supposedly) white Christians, whose declared task was to bring civilization and religion to the Blacks.

> *Jesucristo esá secreto para gentes nieve e branca.*
> *Y a todos da mesa franca, aunque son branco o prieto.*

> Jesus is secret [sacred?] for snow-like whites, but he gives food to everyone, both Blacks and whites.
> (Fernández, "*Flasiquillo*")

The villancico aims to be inclusive and demonstrate that in an ideal society, Blacks can participate in the religious mysteries of European culture, even as whites condescendingly position Blacks as undeserving of that grace. Here, the moral stratum constituted by race is revealed. If the social goal of a pacific cohabitation can be attained in a hypothetical future, the harshness of the present becomes framed as bearable. Jesus is invoked as a symbol of unification between races, a possible salvation, but one that has to be realized in a mystical future that paradoxically reaffirms the inequities of the present. The carnivalesque element of hope in villancicos de remedo means that they share certain similarities with *samba* from Brazil, in the sense that they both aim at subverting the status quo and aspiring to racial equality, only to have the status quo reasserted as soon as the performance is over (DaMatta 1986).

We can observe a tension between the European need to include Black people — culturally and ideologically — into the Christian faith on the one hand, and the desire to maintain this community outside of the established social system on the other.[17] Homi Bhabha describes this tension as an ambivalent movement, a paradox in which the "homogenous ruling class also needs the heterogeneity they deny" (qtd. in Wade 2000: 5) and through which the "white" elites are indeed attempting to recreate, reinvent, and make decisions about Blackness. In music scholarship, the co-optation of Black sound into a product consumable by whites has been much theorized in the Latin/ Ibero-American world. Examining popular musical expression in early 20th-century Latin America, John Charles Chasteen finds the white elites simulating the Other in order to symbolize the political and religious submission of Black people (2004: 177). Even if Europeans did not want to play the music of Blacks themselves, they wanted to believe they could represent this music, and therefore (re)shape it at will, in a project that constructs diversity (Wade 2000) and fabricates authenticity (Johann Gottfried Herder, qtd. in Vianna 1999: 34). In so doing, they actually operated a Gramscian model of hegemony through consensus building and the legitimization of authority, as an official or institutional interest in the cultural forms of the subaltern "obscures social division" (Moore 1997: 6). Still, composers certainly had the responsibility to find *racialized sonic markers*[18] that could at one and the same time represent the Other, maintain the face of inclusiveness (to a segment of the population, at least), and operate at the level of intersubjectivities to establish a hierarchical essentialization of this Other. Together, comedy, laughter, and musically constructed parody became important tools starting in early colonial times, used by librettists while sonically illustrated and amplified by composers.

During the presidency of Getúlio Vargas (who established samba as Brazil's national music in the 1930s), samba texts were revised by the press

and propagandists to align with the ideology of the "good citizen," sometimes departing radically from the song's original lyrics and meaning (Soihet 1998: 104). Moreover, racialized sonic markers were more easily accepted when presented by white-looking artists, as shown in the case of Carmen Miranda. In this context, we can speak of the appropriation of a Black music into a white aesthetic, which dictates both form and content. Likewise, the villancicos de negro appropriated and redesigned racialized sonic markers by creating a sound that the audience would associate with Blackness while integrating it into recognized, morally and ethically acceptable sonic categories that belong to the listener's own conception of music.

The Black Individual as a Character

As Paez Granados notes about 17th-century Portugal, Black people were situated right at the outer margins of the Catholic social order (2013). Even so, they were considered Christians, which led the Church to try to control their behaviour by prohibiting their songs and dances, albeit ineffectively. The Church tolerated the "excessive" cultural and religious expression of Blacks when all else failed, showing thus more tolerance than for white people, with the downside that Black people would not accede to an actual place in society (Tinhorão 1988). What this meant for Black communities is that they probably did not enjoy all the social and legal benefits that other society members would have had, and they would have had to struggle to engage in their own cultural practices. Meanwhile, the Christian identity of Blacks meant that church composers and musicians felt authorized to represent this marginalized population, and that this representation simultaneously allowed composers to introduce otherwise taboo topics and behaviours into their music. Black characters in musical pieces were represented as sexual, overtly physical, and lascivious or as lazy and lacking mental strength. Meanwhile, white elites promoted the ideal of the hard worker, aimed not only at other whites but also to inculcate compliance from their subordinates. The racial binary reinforced the moral binary between good and bad, fulfilling a dual purpose of laying the foundations for aspirational whiteness, and defining it in opposition to an imaginary, unacceptable Blackness. Exaggerating and elaborating on this dual opposition, composers could thus simultaneously produce a comical effect while shaping social intersubjectivities without putting themselves at risk of censorship by the ecclesiastical or political authorities.

Consequently, rather than dismiss the villancico as merely an expression of ruling class fantasy, the examination of the ways in which Black communities

Ola toro zente pleta
P-Cug MM232 ff. 37v - 39

Re[s]p.[osta] A 7

Fig. 1a. "*Ola Toro Zente Pleta*" *Vilancico de Negro*. P-Cug MM232 ff. 37v-39. Paleographic transcription Manuela Lopes de Castro, 2015.

Ola toro zente pleta
P-Cug MM232 ff. 37v - 39

Fig. 1b. "*Ola Toro Zente Pleta*" *Vilancico de Negro*. P-Cug MM232 ff. 37v-39. Paleographic transcription Manuela Lopes de Castro, 2015.

are depicted, trivialized, and essentialized reveals the political strategies of elites. Of course, negrillas could never accurately represent the rich musical practices that took place in the Black cofradias at the beginning of the colonial experience. Western musical notation usually does a rather poor job in doing justice to African rhythms, and this was certainly the case in the 17th century. Still, Stevenson (1968) and Swiadon (2002) see a particular African expression in the rhythm of the villancico.[19] Matta (2009) argues that the "impoverished" melodic and harmonic simplicity of the negrillas is compensated by a rich rhythmical complexity which, for Matta at least, is clearly the result of the influence of Black rhythm. I would prefer to say that villancicos offer a typical essentialization of the Black, teaching us less about actual Black musical sounds of the time than about how Europeans understood, saw, and essentialized the African "groove" of the 17th century. Villancico composers also composed liturgical music in Latin — most of it in complex polyphonic textures. It is therefore clear that the way Blackness is trivialized in simple melodies and limited harmonic structures while set to rhythms potentially inspired by West African polyrhythms is neither fortuitous nor innocent. On the contrary, the creation of villancicos de negro was a huge task, carefully wrought: composers constructed a representation of the musical Other, against which European musical identity would be defined.

In "*Ola Toro Zente Pleta*" (see Fig 1a/1b),[20] a minimalist harmonic pattern is evident in the repetitive alternation of two chords (C and G) that goes on for the whole *resposta*. The *guião*, the harmonic bass line, is only written out in the original manuscript for two bars, accompanied by the instruction: "*Sobre esta dança vai toda a resposta*" ("On this dance goes the whole 'response'"). This piece is, to present knowledge, the first musical setting that includes the word "samba" (Sanches 2018: 346).[21] It is a masterpiece in miniature where the composer seems to have taken up the challenge of writing a restricted melody and harmony while taking advantage of more rhythmic freedom: the accentuation either falls on the upbeats or on the second beat of the bar. It is often accepted that the *hemiola*, by its implication of polyrhythm, is often taken as an "African" marker (Swiadon 2002). Interestingly, the hemiola is totally absent from this "dance," while appearing in abundance in many other villancicos, de negro or otherwise. This may contradict the assumption of a strict rhythmical difference between the villancico de negro and other villancicos, based on the presence or absence of hemiolas.

Another sonic marker of Blackness[22] is the recurring pattern of three syllables of equal duration with the last vowel accented. The words "gulumbá gulumbé," "gulugá gulugué," "zalambá zalambá," or "husihá husihé," for

example, can be found in villancicos from both continents throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.[23] Sometimes this onomatopoeic structure is developed over a short-long-long rhythm, always with accentuation on the last syllable. As states Andrés Lorente in his 1672 *El Por Qué de la Música*, the short-long figure that constitutes the first part of this short-long-long pattern is a typical rhythm used in villancicos to give them a happy and festive character (qtd. in Morales Abril 2009). This short-long rhythm also builds momentum that leads to the accentuation of the long last syllable, so characteristic of the lingua de preto or habla de negro. For example, see the placement of the word "matachín" in the piece "*Venga Turu Flaciquillo*" by Manuel José de Quirós (Fig. 2). Moreover, the frequent use of call and response in conjunction with words of supposed African origin could well be a stylization of African musical practices.
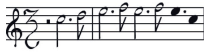

Fig. 2. "*Venga Turu Flanciquillo*" *Negro de Navidad a 5 voces, 1746.* Manuel José de Quirós. AHAG, Música, Papeles sueltos, S.764. Paleographic transcription Omar Morales Abril, 2016.

Villancicos de Negro and Performance

The presence of non-white musicians, especially instrumentalists, is well documented throughout the colonial period (Nava Sánchez 2007; Baker 2008a; Morales Abril 2010). It is entirely possible that Black musicians performed villancicos de negro, or that Indigenous musicians played the indios, thus participating in the stereotyping of their own social and racial groups. At the same time, I do not want to suggest that Black performers were dupes or oblivious to the role they played in reinforcing their own stereotyping. In order to think about the agency of Black performers in the villancicos, I draw on Fernando de Figueiredo Balieiro's reading of Carmen Miranda through the Butlerian lens of performativity:

> With an ironical distance ... Carmen accentuated the traits that caricatured her, auto-parodying herself and using humour to demonstrate to some portion of the audience that she was conscious of the role she was playing in North America ... She emphasized the arbitrariness of the stereotype so that her audience could see her agency. (2018: 281)

As an example, what did Juan de Vera, a 17th century Black Pueblan slave, think of "representing funnily his own racial group with his childish voice, but with the power, agility, and expressive maturity of an adult" (Morales Abril 2010: 17). He represented Blackness in a way that he probably knew was not accurate, but caricatured himself to the point that, like Carmen Miranda, he came to be cherished by fans across all classes and all races, rendering the caricature valid for both whites and Blacks. While white people would see only a first level of satire about Blacks, Black people themselves would understand this exaggeration as a mockery of whites, who were foolish enough to demand, believe in, and laugh at such parodies.

In this sense, we can say that through the cultural appropriation of the Black character and his representation, both composers and performers could achieve some degree of agency — even taking into account its limitations — that had the potential to activate a critique of the established power structure — by subtly and carefully avoiding censorship — and the simultaneous potential to shape intersubjective sensibilities. Illari reminds us that "resistance happens at every level, yielding negotiated results that enrich, and sometimes alter, the intended message" (2007: 412). In particular, musicians at every level could play with anxieties around race and gender through the use of the comical, parodic, and burlesque. Similarly, contemporary performers can make decisions about

how they want to interpret the villancicos de negro and shape the meaning they intend to communicate through them.

It is not unusual to encounter musicologists or performers who read 17th-century villancico de negro according to their own conceptions of the essence of African (sic) music. Matta, for example, goes so far as to reactivate the Othering of this music, depicting it as embodied and festive — all common stereotypes regarding an imaginary Black music: not civilized, not white, not rational, and potentially lascivious. He re-enacts the genre as a subjectifying tool, directing performers of the villancico de negro:

> We can not [sic] fear to exaggerate, to caricature too much. These vilancicos are tales, ingenuous, sarcastic or festive, and the description must be done clearly.... It was necessary to catch a proper swing, not rigid, only possible in a complete relaxed mood. That can demand, besides a normal rehearsal, [the] search of an adequate physical attitude, ready to feel the rhythm, dancing interiorly with great liberty. The principal feature of this repertoire is the feast atmosphere, excessive, almost barbarian, that must be recreated each performance. (Matta 2009: 7-9)[24]

For the sake of comparison, I would like to juxtapose this statement with tips about "how to dance Samba," such as, "You simply need a willingness to learn the rhythm and loosen up a little" (Hassell 2017). In both cases, the emphasis is on physical relaxation and the embodiment of the music, which once again situates Blackness in the body far from rational thought. The similarity between these instructions is not coincidental; it indicates that racialized musical stereotypes are still in play today. Moreover, if we consider that the comedy, joy, and pleasure found in parody result from the audience's supposed familiarity with that which is parodied, we understand that villancicos de negro have to draw on temporally stable stereotypes that have recurred across the centuries in order to provoke a desired response, both in their original context and in contemporary performances.

European-educated composers of villancicos de negro attempted to construct a convincing representation of Black people in music. It should not be surprising then that contemporary Early Music directors, such as Jorge Matta quoted above, use typical topoi of "Afro-Latin" music when they reconstruct historical performances of a genre that is meant boldly to depict the Other.[25] Indeed, the aim is more to reproduce the effect and the rhetorical impact of Early Music on the ears of today's listeners, drawing on the audience's own familiarity with sonic racial markers, rather than finding a hypothetical authenticity in

the way the villancicos may or may not have been performed. Parody draws on quotidian, mundane, and familiar sounds to recall, mimic, and comment on what is meant to be perceived as "Black" sound. Sometimes an imaginary Latin America emerges, where the villancicos are signs of cultural blending, a musical *mestizaje* between European, African, and Indigenous music (Baker 2008b; Marín López 2016; Illari 2007).

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that this folklorization (Marín López 2016), which essentializes Afro-Latin-American music, is not a process that is exclusive to our time, nor does it manifest solely in Early Music circles where a sudden wave of interest in villancicos de negro was accompanied by the commercial success of the genre and an increase in its commodification. Rather, this process of folklorization has been constant throughout the long history of coloniality (Quijano 2000), especially during the 1930s when several Latin American states attempted to integrate non-white populations into a homogenous national identity. But this "incorporation" of Blackness into official culture also led to its transformation, a re-adaptation and re-signification of its elements that, in many senses, co-opted it and "whitened" its features. At the same time, racial markers were the product of an imagined "Black sound" and of a stylized Latin American culture in general (Balieiro 2018).

In critiques of the predominantly white and colonial Early Music movement, articulated outside the Academy by a good number of Latin American musicians, there is an awareness of this systemic essentialization that villancicos de negro indeed symbolize. The performativity of such essentialized and essentializing performances is therefore worth discussion. Unfortunately, we don't have recordings of performances by Juan de Vera (Morales Abril 2010), but we can imagine, through the *carnavalidade* (or *camp*) of Carmen Miranda (Balieiro 2018: 350), how a subaltern use of parody allows the subversion of and responses to top-down attempts to trivialize the Other, and how repetitive performance can either reinforce or subvert racist expressions.[26]

Conclusion

The current scholarly discussion about the role of the villancico, and in particular the villancico de remedo, must be revisited with a critical reading of the articulation of race in this specific context in mind. Judging the villancico to be either "good" for subversion or "bad" because it reinforces power structures only acknowledges one side of the coin. Rather, if we read

the villancico as an early modern mass communication tool, asserting a precise kind of performativity around race, we can connect a good part of the theoretical work about later music to this topic, thereby rendering it more multi-faceted. There are, in the production and reception of the villancico, possible interstices for deviating from and co-opting meaning in different, sometimes antagonistic, directions, and for the creation of new, emergent sets of identities. Illari states that "the villancico remains a vital and fertile instrument for identity construction ... [in] a cultural terrain widely open to multifarious negotiations of meaning" (2007: 440).

I do not wish to defend this repertoire as not racist, and I believe that reinforcing the essentialization or the racialization of sound has terrible consequences. Nevertheless, such pieces should also not be completely dismissed or demonized; rendering them invisible would also be damaging, for it would discourage a critical understanding and limit our historical knowledge. The villancicos de negro can be strategically essentializing when any individual involved in sound production (librettist, composer, interpreter, or dancer) overplays their role so that it renders the despicable aspects illegible.

As Patricia de Santana Pinho states, we must move beyond the dichotomization between elites as active and everyone else as passive (2010: 207), instead focusing on the "process of negotiation" or "the pragmatic practices of compromise and surrender" (199). Because it is true that "the spectacularization of black culture ... continues to be a source of entertainment for the dominant classes" (211), it is important to examine the villancicos de negro and, by extension, all villancicos de remedo, as an early stage in white co-optation of Black music, reshaping Black sound into a white musical vocabulary. This process of co-optation happened just as Europeans began constructing the notion of race. Although the artificial separation of humanity into racial categories is not an independent event, racial categories provided the basis for defining European identity as white and consolidating a white culture. Looking at earlier practices, such as villancicos de negro, we can imagine — even if imperfectly — past race relations, including the interactions between individuals and different ethnic groups. We gain insight into the progressive stylization of racialized sonic markers that ultimately define Black music as lascivious, rhythmic, and "infectious" (Pinho 2010: 193). In recognizing the consolidation of "a discourse in which Blackness is both celebrated ... and paradoxically trapped in a secondary role" (206), we can look at both past and present performances of the villancicos de remedo and approach all forms of music essentialized and racialized by hegemonic cultures in a more critical manner. ❧

Notes

1. "Bacião, Flunando, Flancio" P-Cug MM 228, ff. 24v-27v. (Sanches 2018: 127-130). All translations of lyrics and non-English scholarship are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

2. A recording of this piece will be available on the CD "*Ai Dina, Dina Dana*" to be released in 2021.

3. For a striking example of a contemporary villancico de negro in the context of historically informed performance practice, see the teaser of Jordi Savall's musical project "*Les Routes de l'Esclavage*" [Slavery Trade-Routes] https://youtu.be/ MBKj_5nUXVw?t=118.

4. As a proof of the rising interest in the genre by the end of the century, see also International Congress (1998).

5. The scores of the villancicos could not be printed and were not supposed to be reused, so there was a need for the prolific production of new music for each occasion. See Knighton and Torrente (2007: 10, 100) for an estimation of the total number of villancicos composed in the Iberian world between 1450 and 1800, which represented around 70 percent of the production of composers active in Latin America.

6. There are a few possible labels for this sub-genre, such as "ethnic villancico" (Baker 2007). I prefer here to use the concept of "villancico de remedo" proposed by Omar Morales Abril (2013) because it insists on the function of the genre (mimicry) rather than on its object (the ethnic).

7. This manuscript does not include a musical score.

8. Author's translation, with the help of Tiago Daniel Mota.

9. Morales Abril (2013b) chooses to spell the title of the song this way rather than "Eso Rigor e Repente" as proposed by Stevenson (qtd. in Santamaría 2005). Linguistically, it makes sense: the sentence in modern Castellan would be "eso digo de repente," with a double rhotacism of "D" to "R" (Luis and Estudante 2016: 95); "digo" and "de" becoming "rigo re" are coherent and in alignment with the typical aspects of the lingua de preto described below.

10. Various recordings of this piece are available. For a video example, see the version by Ars Longa de la Habana: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PP5sf0cCaCY. In the recorded version by Jordi Savall in *Villancicos y Danzas Criollas*, the caricature of Black people is emphasized by incorrectly accentuating the first syllable of the word "*cabeza*" (head) in the sentence "*Mucho me duele la cabeza*" (I have such a headache). Nevertheless, it appears that the score (in Morales Abril's transcription) sets the word "cabeza" with the right accentuation using the rhythm "short-long-long" described in the discussion of Fig 2.

11. Still, it is important to note that the villancicos in Castilian (all the villancicos outside the subcategory de remedo) are not necessarily invoking laughter to convey spirituality and may even have secular themes such as love and desire.

12. "*Plimo Plimo, que grita*" P-Cug MM 232, ff. 39-41. Paleographic transcription by Manuela Castro 2016. Sanches elaborated this translation through the

consultation of Kikongo dictionaries and grammatical texts, but he is still planning to refine it with the help of Kikongo language specialists (see also Sanches 2018: 343). An example can be seen in the video "Plimo plimo que grita" by the Portuguese ensemble *O Bando de Surunyo* https://youtu.be/kOgVGydXiJA?t=115.

13. Coimbra, in particular, was a city with a strong nationalist political position.

14. Loose translation by the author. An example can be seen in the video "*Apalta tula Guinea*" by the Uruguayan ensemble De Profundis https://youtu.be/8FfgC9VlU5U?t=135.

15. It is important to note, nevertheless, that villancicos differ from popular processions in the sense that they don't present genuine forms of syncretism or acculturation "from below."

16. Besides the reading of the villancico expressed by Sanches (2018) in the Portuguese context, the argument of a more sympathetic Black character is often supported by commentaries on texts by Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. See in particular Robinson (2012) and Underberg (2001).

17. I am writing specifically about Africans slaves here. Africans constituted the greatest number of slaves and slaves were not citizens, nor did they have basic legal rights. Still, generalizations to Indigenous people, freed Blacks, and mixed-race individuals can also be made.

18. "Racialized sonic markers" is the expression I prefer to use instead of vague and inherently racist labels such as "African sounds" or "Black rhythms." The wording "racialized sonic marker" speaks of the musical features adapted by white people to represent Blackness through sound.

19. See how Swadley (2014) analyzes a 6/8 bar in a transcription by Stevenson, emphasizing the rhythmic "Africanness" of the songs.

20. A video of the resposta by O Bando de Surunyo is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ddc2ifhgnA.

21. See also Sanches 2018: 339-348 for a discussion on the interpretative choices made by his ensemble O Bando de Surunyo in the video mentioned above.

Note that this is the first known instance of the *word* "samba" being used as lyrics in a musical setting. The apparition of the musical style known today as "samba" is not directly related to this example.

22. A thorough comparison of the musical features of the villancico de negro and of the villancico in Castillan is, to my knowledge, still lacking. Such a comparison could elucidate with even more detail how Europeans of the time essentialized Blackness through music.

23. The triple-syllable words referenced can be found in the following pieces: "*A Ver la Gente de Angola*," "*Zente Pleto*," "*Flaciquillo*," and "*Pue Tambén Somo Gente*". These words could refer to African musical instruments, musical practices, and/or dances (Ars Longa 2013).

24. The text, published originally in Portuguese, includes an English translation. However, some corrections have been proposed for better understanding.

25. A very common topos in the contemporary performances of villancicos de negro by Early Music ensembles is the systematic use of percussion. Among many available examples, here the Ensemble Villancico performs music from Ecuador: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjJLKN2qvkE.

26. An example can be seen in the video "Ese Rigo Re Repente" by the Argentine-Italian ensemble *La Chimera* featuring El Negro Ivan García: https://youtu.be/hB6GiRmGFKI?t=362.

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