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ESPAÑÓLES, INDIOS, AFRICANOS Y GITANOS.  
EL ALCANCE GLOBAL DEL FANDANGO EN MÚSICA, CANTO Y DANZA

SPANIARDS, INDIANS, AFRICANS AND GYPSIES:  
THE GLOBAL REACH OF THE FANDANGO IN MUSIC, SONG, AND  
DANCE

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# SON JAROCHO IN NEW YORK: JARANA AND FANDANGO AS SYMBOLS OF A NEW MEXICAN IDENTITY

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## **Resumen**

En la última década el son jarocho, música originaria del Estado mexicano de Veracruz, se ha abierto paso en la escena musical neoyorquina. Vinculada a una diáspora de clase media conformada por músicos profesionales, intérpretes y profesores, así como por empresarios cuyos lujosos restaurantes en Manhattan o Brooklyn sirven como foros para estos artistas, lideran esta escena Bandas como Radio Jarocho o Jarana Beat, que comparten dos objetivos musicales: por un lado, fusionar el son jarocho con el rock, y por otro lado, mantener en sus actuaciones un segmento acústico propio del fandango jarocho tradicional, usando la jarana y la tarima como elementos centrales de identidad y autenticidad. Esta comunidad, que congrega a músicos de toda Latinoamérica, busca su lugar en la escena de la world music neoyorquina, en un intento por construir un México-Americano alternativo, un Otro “amigable” y profesionalizado, en contraste con la tradicional migración mexicana de clase obrera.

## **Palabras clave:**

Son jarocho, fandango, jarana, diaspora, migration, New York, Veracruz, Mexico.

*Jarana y Fandango son símbolos de la nueva identidad de México.*

## **Abstract**

In the past decade, a New York-based music scene surrounding son jarocho—music from the Mexican State of Veracruz—has started to develop. It is linked to a middle class diaspora of Mexican professional musicians who perform and teach, in concert with impresarios whose upscale restaurants in Manhattan and Brooklyn provide performance venues for these artists. Bands like Radio Jarocho and Jarana Beat lead a scene that has a two-fold agenda. On one hand, the bands perform a fusion of the genre with rock, but, on the other hand, they always play an acoustic segment in which they try to organize a traditional "fandango" (a traditional dance-party), having the “jarana” guitar and the dancing “tarima” as central elements of identity and authenticity. Integrating musicians from all-over Latin America, this community, in contrast to the traditional working class migrant Mexicans, is trying to find a niche within the New York world music community, in an attempt to construct an alternative Mexican-American, a “friendly” and

professionalized Other.

### **Keywords**

Son jarocho, fandango, jarana, diaspora, migration, New York, Veracruz, Mexico.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

An "exotic chocolate sauce chicken dipped in mole sauce served with beans and rice" is advertised as one of the most valuable recipes in the menu of Casa Mezcal, an upscale Mexican restaurant which opened in the summer of 2010 in the Lower East side of Manhattan. This "secret family recipe" attracts New York foodies and the local Mexican middle class alike to the restaurant, which is property of the same individuals who owned Café Central, a venue that served as hotspot for intellectuality and the arts in Oaxaca, Mexico. Up to late 2013, in the basement bar of Casa Mezcal, one could have been lucky enough to hear an evening performance by Radio Jarocho, New York's pioneering ensemble of the sophisticated Mexican popular music genre son jarocho or even, if it was a Monday, one could have taken a course with the band members on jarana playing or zapateado percussive dancing.

The five-piece band, with Mexican and Latin American members, might not seem to be a surprise in the multicultural landscape of New York, but what is interesting is that Radio Jarocho is part of a small son jarocho scene that has been developing in the city for over a decade. It now includes other bands such as Jarana Beat, Villalobos Brothers and Son de Montón, which not only perform, but give workshops and classes similar to those that were given at Casa Mezcal.

been able to recognize several types of places where different musicians perform. These range from the *nortño* musicians in the subway train cars to the festivities in East Harlem for Cinco de Mayo or for the Day of the Dead, to the concerts held at places such as La Boom, Casa Azul library, Casa Mezcal, Hecho en Dumbo, the Mexican Institute of Culture—official organ of the Mexican Government—and the Museo del Barrio. Since 2011, a yearly Encuentro de Jaraneros de New York (Gathering of New York Jaraneros) has taken place, with several local bands and Mexican guests performing. This has been an attempt to establish an annual tradition similar to that of Los Angeles, where there have been more than 10 of these gatherings. In Tlacotalpan, Veracruz, epicenter of jarocho in Mexico, a similar gathering has been held for over 30 years, since the “rediscovery” of the genre.

In this article I plan to analyze the phenomenon of the son jarocho scene in New York within the context of the Mexican diaspora in the city and the New York world music scene, as well as with the development of son jarocho, from its popularity in the 1950s as an official symbol of Mexican nationalism, to its revival in the late 20th Century as a sophisticated popular genre which would be linked to the political left wing of Mexico (Cardona 2012). Integrating musicians from all over Latin America, the sound of these bands attracts a Mexican diaspora that contrasts with the traditional low wage working-class Mexican community. Son jarocho in New York is linked to a higher profile middle-class Mexican migrant, and thus tries to find a niche within the New York world music community that revolves around places such as Barbés, a well-known concert venue and bar in Brooklyn. The bands performing the Mexican genre attempt to construct an alternative Mexican-American, a “friendly” and professionalized Other. Within a theoretical frame of Arjun Appadurai’s “social imagination” (Appadurai 1990), I also argue that Veracruz, son jarocho, and in particular the fandango and the jarana small stringed guitar are those essential “building blocks” to construct the ethnoscapas, mediascapas, financescapas, ideoscapas and technoscapas within an upscale middle-class Mexican diasporic community in New York.

### **MEXICAN DIASPORA IN NEW YORK**

Much has been written on the Mexican migration to New York, and in general to the U.S., and it is no secret that the vast majority of this Mexican diaspora consists of working-class, low income and undereducated subjects, most of whom arrived through an illegal crossing as a consequence of the search for better economic conditions than those in Mexico, or through the 1940 to 1960s Bracero Program. Most of this diaspora resides in the southwestern part of the country, with over 50% inhabiting California.

expanded, at the same time that the skill composition of the Mexican migrant flow began to improve and the gender composition shifted, becoming less male-dominated as more single women and whole families began to migrate (Marcelli and Cornelius 2001:106).

The influx of migration of Mexicans has increased at a 30 percent rate each decade. In 2010, 31 million Mexicans were counted in the USA, against the 20 million of the 2000 census. But in New York City the rate almost doubled, going from 183,000 in 2000 to the most recent 342,000, representing 4.2 percent of the city's population, against the 2.3 percentage it represented in 2000 (Ennis, et al 2011). Among the Latino population of the city, it also jumped from constituting 8.4 per cent to 14.3. On a darker side, the Mexican community in New York is the minority with the lowest level of education: about 41 percent of all Mexicans between ages 16 and 19 have dropped out of school, according to census data (Bergad 2011).

This stronger presence of Mexican population has triggered and consolidated a local cultural life, with a large number of cheap restaurants throughout the five boroughs that are almost replicas of the famous *fondas*, or low budget home-style food restaurants, that are typical in Mexico. There are a couple of tabloids, *El Diario de México* and *El Diario La Prensa*, both in Spanish, which focus on local stories of small villages in states such as Puebla, Michoacán or Veracruz, among other places of origin of the migrants. Local television has three channels in Spanish, and it is interesting to point out that Telemundo regularly transmits soccer matches from the Mexican league, so that Mexicans who watch open air New York TV don't miss the results of their favorite teams. All these events connect directly to a network of local Mexican community celebrations such as the Cinco de Mayo Parade in East Harlem, the Carrera Antorcha Guadalupeña, or the Feria del Sol, most of which are organized by the New York Tepeyac Foundation sponsored by Mexican businessmen established in New York. There is a small chain of fast "authentic" Mexican food called *El Águila*, which opened in 2008 in Passaic, New Jersey, and has a couple of branches in East Harlem; in October 2012, for example, one could taste a tamal while listening to some ranchera music and even get the autograph of Mexican famous boxer Erick "El Terrible" Morales, who was invited to the restaurant's 116<sup>th</sup> street branch in East Harlem.

As Cathy Ragland's 2003 study of Mexican *sonideros* in the New York area shows, members of this Mexican community are linked to particular parties where these DJs play cumbia and other Latin American genres. They have a particular style that includes a sort of toasting technique to send greetings among family and gang members between New York City and Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, an urban extension east of Mexico's capital. The two sites are playfully termed as "Puebla York" and "Neza York". A great number of these party goers also gather in the club La Boom in Queens, a musically versatile venue that can have a Mexican ska-punk band one night, a *norteño* act the



following day, and a Latin pop star in a third night. Besides musical exponents from other Latin American countries, it usually organizes events with bands that could easily play in front of a massive audience in the marginalized and rough zones of Mexico City.

But then there is another, scarcely studied side to the Mexican diaspora in New York, for the owners of the food chains, the tortilla distributors, and some executives of the newspapers actually live in the city and have high incomes. At the same time, 12 percent of the Mexican population in New York City –that is, 40,000– have a college education or higher. These New Yorkers are another type of Mexican, a mix of white-collar, businessmen and intellectuals with particular tastes and interests: they are not looking for authenticity at El Águila or cumbia parties, and they don't precisely get along with the working-class Mexicans.

In this context, gourmet Mexican food had a boost: while there had been the prestigious Rosa Mexicano since 1983, between 2008 and 2013 new places such as Black Ant, Casa Mezcal, Chavela's, Fonda Mexicana, Hecho en Dumbo and Mesa Coyoacán opened, with prices and locations that would "repel" the blue-collar Mexicans. Some of these upscale new restaurants had stages or basement bars for musicians to perform, and sophisticated genres such as son jarocho were welcome, since a sophisticated genre was apt for a "sophisticated" audience.

#### **FROM TLACOTALPAN TO NEW YORK**

In the early 2000s, the Mexican musician Gabriel Guzmán, who had arrived in New York in 1998 to earn an M.A. in Music, brought with him a few jaranas after a holiday in his homeland. He then started to seek musicians who could be interested in performing one of his favorite Mexican traditional music genres, son jarocho. By 2003 he founded the band Los Olvidados, with which he performed traditional songs of the jarocho repertoire. Two years later, he founded the band Semilla and with this, possibly the first New York public fandangos took place. Guzmán's projects were linked to a so-called revival of son jarocho in Mexico, which had started to take place in the 1970s, when a group of young musicians decided to recover the "authentic" jarocho, after a few decades in which it had been adapted for urban audiences.

The origins of son jarocho date back to the Colonial age, and three musical roots have been recognized in its foundations: African, Indigenous (American) and European (Spanish, particularly the Arabic-Andalus music). These were present in the original sones performed by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century conjuntos, bands with an instrumentation that consisted of several guitars, from small high-voiced ones to the lower-voice guitarrón, as well as the harp and violins. Jarocho finally got its shape in the 20th Century to become one of the universally acclaimed popular music genres in Mexico, on the one hand due to its uniqueness and the fact that any Mexican could instantly recognize it, and on the other

hand due to the fact that the interpretation of the genre, usually in 3/4 or 6/8 with abundant use of hemiola, requires a highly developed technical skill. It thus became a resource for pride regarding artistic achievement.

It was in the 1940s, when Miguel Alemán Valdés took office, that jarocho got the spotlight. The president was a native from Veracruz, and he alleged that son jarocho was his favorite music, which, in the authoritarian paternalistic post-Revolutionary regime was translated into tremendous support for the genre from the state budget. But, at the same time, Alemán's modernization perspectives were seen by some of his rivals within the party as anti-nationalist, and thus the promotion of son jarocho was a way to divert the criticisms and show him as an authentic Mexican nationalist (Cardona 2012). The jarocho supported by Alemán reached Tijuana and Los Angeles by the 1960s, and ignited a local scene which had its reference of authenticity in the jarocho performed by the state-sponsored artists.

In the 1970s, several anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and musicians started a search for the authentic son jarocho, the one which predated the Alemán years. For this they drew upon some masters of the tradition who were forgotten in several villages of Veracruz. The most famous encounter being that of the master Arcadio Hidalgo (1893-1984) and several younger musicians, who founded the band Mono Blanco.

Meanwhile, in California, bands like Conjunto Hueyapan, Conjunto Alma Grande and Conjunto Jardín had grown with Alemán's harp-driven jarocho (Cardona 2012), and had created a scene with that particular model. By the 1980s, when the different musicians met, there was a mutual distrust, but eventually the bands started respecting each other and recognizing their work, especially after the Mexican-born musicians realized that the California-based bands were formed as part of a pro-migrant Chicano movement (Cardona 2012). Within this context, the east Los Angeles band Los Lobos adopted jarocho as an influence in their rock music, and recorded their version of "La Bamba", which eventually became one of the greatest hits in the country, raising the popularity of jarocho in the USA, and raising the voice of the struggle of the Chicano community (Loza 1992).

### **FANDANGO AT THE MERCURY LOUNGE**

On November 30, 2012, an unusual event took place at the Mercury Lounge, one of New York's alternative rock hotspots. In the middle of a gig, the band David Wax Museum got off the stage, and among the audience started playing its instruments in an acoustic manner. They were joined by the members of Radio Jarocho, and suddenly a fandango was organized in the middle of an American middle-class crowd. The people went mad as a response to the unexpected performance, which lasted for a couple of songs before David Wax Museum got on stage again to continue performing its indie rock. That fandango perhaps could not have happened without the effort and insistence of Guzmán, who by

then had already been promoting jarocho in New York for a decade. After Semilla split up in 2007, he founded Radio Jarocho, whilst other members of Semilla created Jarana Beat and Son de Montón.

In 2005, Julia del Palacio arrived in New York City to study toward a Ph.D. in history at Columbia University. At the same time she was a freelance jarocho dancer, and soon met Gabriel to join Radio Jarocho as an occasional dancer. Back then, as she remembers, there was basically no jarocho scene. Every summer at Washington Square Park Radio Jarocho started to organize a weekly fandango, a typical party of son jarocho where the musicians play acoustically, while many dancers take to the tarima (small wooden dancing base) and people surrounding dance along. “We were the first to organize fandangos there. Back then we were almost the only ones in the party, or there were five persons, but eventually more people started gathering around us” (Del Palacio, personal communication). Even if Radio Jarocho, Jarana Beat and Son de Montón were around in 2005, they were still trying to find several spaces to perform. Radio Jarocho started playing in several events of the Mexican Council, as well as at Barbès, Jalopy Theater, Terraza 7 and East Harlem’s Carlito’s Café. Guzmán evokes “memorable fandangos” in that place, including one in January 2006, when the Veracruz musician Patricio Hidalgo (grandson of Arcadio Hidalgo) performed alongside them. The relationship with Patricio Hidalgo would grow to the point that he collaborated in some songs of Radio Jarocho’s albums. In December 2011, Radio Jarocho invited Hidalgo again to New York to give a workshop on jarana playing. In 2009 the band released the first ever New York-made son jarocho record, an album where the band performed some classic tunes of the genre with a twist. “La Bamba”, perhaps the best-known jarocho tune—due to the 1950s Ritchie Valens rock and roll version and the 1980s Los Lobos chicano rock version—was included in the album, with some modification in the lyrics to express the transnational situation of the band.

At that moment, Jarana Beat and Son de Montón started performing in similar places. The groups also became part of a Mexican music scene in New York which included the singer-songwriter Rana Santacruz, a former performer in Mexico City’s Latin rock scene, who arrived to NYC in 2002 to work as an executive at the Sony record label. Santacruz maintained his artistic career as a solo singer, and released Chicavasco in 2009, which included the track “El Ranchero Punk”; in 2015, he released a second album. On the other hand, there were projects like Banda de los Muertos, which consisted of mostly American jazz musicians who perform banda brass music from the north of Mexico; or the Flor de Toloache female mariachi. All these bands usually perform in the same circuit of world music venues such as Barbès in Brooklyn, and all are linked both to the Mexican cultural circuit and the afore mentioned upscale restaurants.

to study violin on a Fulbright grant. He founded a band called Bamba NY, with which he performed some traditional repertoire from Veracruz in places such as Joe's Pub. Villalobos is a virtuoso musician who started playing instruments at a young age along with his brothers in the State of Veracruz, where they were born. In 2006, his other two brothers, Alberto and Luis, moved to New York, and they founded the Villalobos Brothers band, which had a debut performance in Carnegie Hall. While they were the only musicians directly from Veracruz in the scene, they were not only linked to son jarocho: given the versatility of their style and classical formation, they performed a wider span of music, and thus were not interested in being tagged as jarocho. They did help enormously, however, especially with the release of their second album in 2012, to promote the scene, since their single, "El San Lorenzo", was their own arrangement of a son huasteco.

Sinuhé Padilla, Jarana Beat's lead singer and founder, describes the show of his band as two-fold: they start as Jarana Beat and finish with a traditional jarocho fandango. "We get off the stage, disconnect the instruments and play with no microphones. Some people bring their jaranas and others bring their dancing shoes" (Padilla, personal communication). Born in Mexico City, Padilla has travelled and studied music around Latin America, and he arrived in New York in 2007 after an academic invitation. The growth of interest in jarocho in the city through the diverse courses, attended mostly by graduate students or professional musicians, has led to the creation of a jarana workshop in Brooklyn, where Padilla built the first New York-made jaranas. Jarana Beat has also given master classes on jarocho at the Berklee College of Music.

Both Jarana Beat and Radio Jarocho follow the mentioned two-part format in which a segment of their show, usually at the end, is dedicated to pure acoustic son jarocho, while in the other section they perform their own fusions. It is in these original creations that the main differences between the bands can be heard: Radio Jarocho fuses the genre in a very respectful manner, adding some Latin American music and rock elements. Jarana Beat also performs a fusion of the genre with other Latin American sounds, but they also play an altered version of a son from the western Mexican state of Guerrero, on the Pacific coast. The Villalobos Brothers range from Latin Pop to son jarocho, and Son de Montón tries to keep only within the borders of traditional jarocho.

These bands share certain elements: they are essential pieces in the creation of the alternative Mexican presence, but they also create a branch of it, a jarocho presence. But perhaps the essential element is that the object of the jarana and the act of the fandango take the center stage within this scene; fandango unifies the bands, while the jarana articulates the whole differences between the bands.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the summer of 2012, the Mexican low-budget airline Interjet inaugurated its Mexico City-New York air route. This, along with Aeromexico's classic cheap midnight Flight 440, known as "El Tecolote", have helped to promote a permeability between Mexico and New York: whilst the borderlands have a natural transnational flux due to a shared territory, the increase of Mexicans in New York has led to this artificial permeability nourished by cheaper transport between the cities. The still very small jarocho scene has emerged in this new permeable Mexican-American fertile zone, becoming an expression of the desire for cosmopolitanism of a new Mexican transnational and translocal condition: it is transnational in the sense that it deals with being Mexican in the U.S., or Mexican-American; but it is also translocal in the sense that it tries to place New York City in a circuit where it becomes, along with Tlacotalpan, Los Angeles, and a few other urban areas, a node of son jarocho as an international genre. Each node has its uniqueness, Tlacotalpan having the traditional town fandangos, Los Angeles having jarocho as a symbol of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Chicano culture, and in New York, jarocho being a connection with the local hip scene, an element to construct a Mexican that is contrasted to the mainstream paisano.

The New York jarochoes are a result of the clash of the different cultural presences within the Mexican middle-class community in the city: a clash that has originated a new space. I would rather not call it a third space, although I refer to the same concept as Bhabha, who mentions this idea as a clash of two cultures generating a third space. In this case, I think the complexity has reached much more cultural levels: it is a clash not only of two cultures, but actually of several "third spaces" previously existing. This new space of Mexicanity is a consequence of the clash in New York City of different Latin American migrant cultures, of their clash with Asian and European migrant cultures, and, at the same time, their crash with the Anglo Saxon or "white" section of society. Within this, there is also the economic class clash, where the Mexican middle-class constructs itself in opposition to its blue-collar compatriots. Out of these multiple social and cultural clashes comes the reshaped hip Mexican-American, one who does not work in construction sites, but as an artist, white-collar worker or businessman; a Mexican-American that does not eat at El Águila for 10 dollars, but he rather tastes the sophisticated meals of Mesa Coyoacán, Hecho en Dumbo or Casa Mezcal for more than 30 dollars.

The New York son jarocho performers, linked to the middle-class migration, generate a transnational identity which has four strong presences: the Mexican and the American on one level, and the New Yorker and the Jarocho on the other level. It is these four presences that construct this identity and that make jarochoes a unique and appealing artist type for the Mexican-American hip middle class in the city. Within these four presences, the jarana guitar and the fandangos become elements of friction and connection: the emblematic instrument and dance parties of son jarocho become one of the strongest

imaginary blocks to generate the cultural flows of the hip Mexican in New York.

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## **INTERVIEWS**

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Guzmán, Gabriel. Composer and founding member of Radio Jarocho. New York, October 2, 2012.

Padilla, Sinuhé. Composer and founding member of Jarana Beat. New York, December 10, 2012.

Villalobos, Ernesto. Member of Villalobos Brothers. December 6, 2012.

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