

THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AFRO-ECUADORIAN NARRATIVES IN A PLURINATIONAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

In 2008, the Republic of Ecuador created a new Constitution with a particularly salient feature: Plurinationality. Given the discursive trends across Latin America toward a politics of multiculturalism, this research is an attempt to understand the significance of cultural representations in relationship to multiculturalism. More specifically, this research focuses on 'traditional' Afro-Ecuadorian artists in Esmeraldas City, Ecuador, and their positionality in relationship to broader Ecuadorian society. The first section of the article focuses on the theoretical contextualization of the research: a discussion of the emergence of plurinationalism and the underlying assumptions of racial democracy that it evokes. The second half of the article incorporates the voices of many artists, musicians, academics, and activists to form an understanding of the ways in which they are part of the construction of Afro-descendant identity in Ecuador today.



Festival of the Virgen Carmen, Photograph by Andrea Hale

INTRODUCTION: DISCRIMINATION AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

It was a Monday afternoon. By now, I was a regular visitor of the local Cultural Center—checking out books from the library and walking through the exhibits. It was hot out, like most days. I was sitting inside waiting to meet with the director of the library when a young black boy came to the door. He looked to be about 9 years old with a miniature wooden car in his hands. His clothes were tattered. He asked the guards if the museum was open, saying that he want-

ed to see what was inside. The guards gently replied: “Sorry, the museum is closed. You will have to come back another day.” The boy questioned the sign on the glass door that said the museum was *in fact* open, but the guards again gently replied that the museum was closed for the day and that the boy would have to come back at another time.

I sat on the marble seat in the air-conditioned lobby wondering: Did I really just see what I think I saw? I did not want to jump to any conclusions for lack of understanding, so I

confronted the guards: “Isn’t the museum open? Why didn’t you let the boy in?” They half-smiled and replied, “You know they are only here to make trouble. They go inside and make a mess.” I could not help but note the irony of the moment: the Cultural Center, open to the public, selectively closed its doors to a boy that probably belonged to one of the low-income neighborhoods of Esmeraldas, which the center was supposed to culturally represent and serve. There could not have been a more poignant and subtle example of the way in which discrimination existed in Esmeraldas.

On a separate occasion, I listened to Mercedes Vargas, a local social activist, talk about the sort of environmental racism faced by many people every day. In the outskirts of the city, there is an oil refinery, which releases black smoke into the air twenty-four hours a day. The smoke directly flows into the peripheral neighborhood of ‘*Lucha de los pobres*’ (‘the fight of the poor’) because “[t]hey say we are like vultures. That we are immune to all sickness. We have no political power to claim our rights, so we accept the minimum.”¹ Both the boy in the museum and Vargas’s account demonstrate the legacy and continuance of racism in Esmeraldas today—firstly as a form of prejudice linked to a micro-aggression and secondly as a political and structural lack of accountability to the health of those people whose lives are valued less because of racist preconceptions about the ‘immunity’ of black bodies to pollution and more broadly, pain.

Ongoing racial discrimination is the legacy of a long history of separation and exclusion of Afro-Ecuadorians in respect to the Ecuadorian state. Part of this history is of Afro-Ecuadorian social activism and cultural production. Esmeraldas is the most Northern province of Ecuador, bordering Colombia and considered the ancestral land of Afro-descendants.ⁱ It continues to serve as an important center for Afro-descendant cultural production, one form of which is marimba music and its accompanying dance forms. Jacinto Fierro,

an activist in the movement for collective land rights for the Afro-Ecuadorian community, recounts that the formation of organizations that began speaking about Afro-Ecuadorian land rights on a national level emerged from marimba groups.² The organization of the dance and music groups became the basis for the formation of community identity and empowerment, through which people became conscious of their rights to land and dignity.

In contrast to an understanding of marimba as a base for organizational forms of resistance, scholar Juan García Salazar critiqued marimba performances in Esmeraldas City by arguing that these performances that are supposedly representative of the Afro-Esmeraldeñan community in fact reinforce systems of oppression because there are no narratives of resistance or effective political change within the performance.³ This critique reads marimba performance as a token expression of multiculturalism serving the interests of the audiences who look upon the spectacle. The tension between marimba as a symbol of resistance and marimba as a token of multiculturalism that reinforces racist stereotypes suggests two ways of understanding the ongoing debate about the politics of cultural representation and its implications on the lives of Afro-descendant peoples in Ecuador. My research is placed within this debate and is an attempt to understand the politics of Afro-Ecuadorian cultural representations in the City of Esmeraldas and the people that actively construct those representations. The following paper is divided into three principle sections: first, the history of race in Ecuador and its important contributions to the creation of plurinationalism as the current political paradigm; second, a more focused look at the history of Afro-Ecuadorian intellectual history; and, finally, an analysis of Marimba as a contemporary form of Afro descendant cultural production. Altogether, the article presents a historical as well as theoretical analysis of what Afro-Ecuadorian identity is—not a set of innate characteristics, but rather actively constructed representations—and its political implications in Ecuadorian society.

METHODS & PRACTICES

The research was motivated by a very simple question with an impossible answer: What is Afro-Ecuadorian culture and how does it relate to

ⁱ Though Esmeraldas is considered the ancestral lands of Afro-descendants, there exist different communities with distinct cultural practices both in the City of Esmeraldas as well as the 40 parroquias of the province. These communities include Afro-descendants, Chachis/Cayapas, the Awá, the Épera, and Montubios. The diverse context of Esmeraldas constantly informs the way that Afro Ecuadorians define their own identity and culture. Heidi Feldman describes the situational landscape of Afro Ecuadorians as being part of the ‘Black Pacific’ in which “(1) a greater distancing from ‘Africa’ in its internal discourse of identity... (2) a shared history with indigenous cultures... and (3) ... a very different national experience as part of smaller, often socially invisible minorities,” (Ritter 2011, 576).

plurinationality? I try to understand this question by focusing on the ways in which ‘Afro-Ecuadorians’ and ‘Afro-descendants’ are addressed or left out of mainstream narratives of Ecuadorian history, as well as how these categorizations of difference relate to the lived experiences of artists that perform in marimba groups in Esmeraldas City. For two months and twenty days, I traveled across the Northern province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador, going to marimba shows, cultural events, cultural expositions, parades, and religious festivals. I also conducted informal and formal interviews with various Afro-descendant artists, social activists, and political figures. I lived in the city of Esmeraldas for a month and stayed on a small 9-hectar farm along the Cayapas River for a month. From there, I traveled to Borbón, San Lorenzo, and various smaller towns along the river, including San Miguel, Telembí, Zapallo Grande, and Pichiyacu de los Chachis. I followed up these travels with a one-week trip to Quito to get a sense of Afro-descendants’ positioning in the national imagery. I met with representatives of Afro-descendant cultural organizations and visited national museums. In my research, I chose, for the most part, to directly focus on the research that I carried out in Esmeraldas City, though all my experiences informed my analysis and writings.

The research methods varied with the changing locations and cultural contexts. In Esmeraldas City, I met a popular Afro-descendant singer named Sonia España and ended up living with her and her family in Tiguinsa, a neighborhood on the Southern outskirts of the city center. Through living with Sonia and accompanying her to different shows with the local government’s official cultural group *Africa Negra* (Black Africa), I was able to observe the lifestyle of artists as well as begin to understand the relationship between their personal lives and the more abstract notions of cultural production and representation. At the farm *El Encanto*, along the River *Cayapas* and all the smaller towns along the river, I learned firsthand about the lifestyle of living along the river and the differences between concepts of culture in the city and in more rural areas. While there, I conducted interviews with members of both Afro-Ecuadorian and Chachi people. Overall, my research consisted of two main methods: interviews and participant observation.

In interviews, as my research progressed

throughout the summer, I had to articulate my research topic to many people and finally came upon the sentence that most precisely described my focus: *How are struggles for social justice in the Afro-descendant community reflected in different modes of cultural expression?* Though I identified this question as one that particularly interested me, I realized that not everyone consciously struggles for social justice or defines social justice in the same way. Furthermore, places of performance are sites in which a broad range of social processes takes place. Therefore, most of my interviews began with life histories related to dance and music. I asked almost everyone the following questions:

1. How did you become a musician/dancer?
2. Do you feel respected and valued as a professional artist?
3. Do you feel that the government has supported traditional ‘Afro-Ecuadorian’ forms of cultural expression?
4. Many people say Afro-Ecuadorian culture is disappearing. What do you think?
5. What are your goals in your career/life?

I changed or elaborated upon this basic set of questions depending on the person with whom I was speaking (e.g. if I was talking with an artist, an academic, a state bureaucrat, etc.). Depending on the person, interviews lasted from twenty minutes to an hour. Most interviews were conducted one on one, while two sets of interviews were conducted in groups; these lasted between two and three hours.

The participant observation portion of my methodology consisted of attending almost all of *Africa Negra*’s performances during my month in Esmeraldas City, as well as seeing other groups in the area perform. As a guest of the group *Africa Negra*, I was able to ride on the bus to and from shows with the dancers and musicians, getting a sense of the process of performing. In addition, I assisted at some rehearsals and the local Culture Festival, which featured a salsa band from Colombia; I also took marimba, percussion, and dance classes in the Conservatory of Esmeraldas.

The interviews as well as the participant observation allowed me to have a more nuanced understanding of the significance of marimba within peoples’ lives as well as the wide range of contexts in which both artists and audience members interact with and create meaning from marimba performance

and practice. I am indebted to all the people that have collaborated with me in the creation of this project. With their collaboration, I have been able to conduct over seventy interviews and have gained invaluable insight into the lives and perspectives of many people who identify as Afro-descendants.

This is not a comprehensive study of the world of marimba in Esmeraldas City. There are many marimba groups working in the city, from groups of college students to younger children to other professional dance ensembles. I talked to artists from many groups, but did not have the time to spend a more extended amount of time with them. I spent most of my time with one performance group, *Africa Negra*, an organization which had a particularly unique economic and political position given that it was the only salaried marimba group in the city. Furthermore, the group had a particular political position and unique access to media and performance opportunities because of the group's relationship with the government and its agreement to represent Afro-Esmeraldeñan culture. Despite the various interviews that I carried out, the main limitation of the study was time. I was unable to spend more than a month with artists in Esmeraldas City, which unfortunately made it difficult for me to get a sense of artistic life over time.

DECONSTRUCTING PLURINATIONALISM: THE LEGACY OF MESTIZAJE

Ecuador is a constitutional State of rights and justice, a social, democratic, sovereign, independent, unitary, intercultural, multinational and secular State. It is organized as a republic and is governed using a decentralized approach. Sovereignty lies with the people, whose will is the basis of all authority, and it is exercised through public bodies using direct participatory forms of government as provided for by the Constitution.

—Article 1,
Constitution of the
Republic of Ecuador
2008

With this new construction of the State comes what can be perceived as a necessity to erase the past. Personally, I believe it is necessary to go back and look at this past when we consider new ways of doing politics in relation to historically discriminated groups, and if we want to generate

mechanisms of reparation. Unfortunately, this is not what is generally occurring.

—Alexandra Ocles⁴

As of 2008, the Republic of Ecuador established a new constitution with two particularly salient features: Plurinationality and *Sumak Kawsay* (good living). Plurinationality is a model of statehood defining nationality not as a single people with a single language and culture, but instead as “a large group of persons whose existence precedes the formation of the Ecuadorian state and its members share a set of their own cultural characteristics that are unlike the rest of society.”⁵ This definition differs from the traditional understanding of a nation-state in which the state as the political organization coincides with a single or centralizing sociocultural entity. In an attempt to be more inclusive of the various nations of people living within the Ecuadorian geopolitical territory, the current Ecuadorian constitution legally recognizes cultural diversity, different forms of self-government, and territoriality. Plurinationalism has further been described as a ‘nation of nations,’ in which society and its democratic political institutions recognize the existence of culturally distinct peoples and nationalities as political subjects within the Ecuadorian State of Social Rule of Law.⁶ Today, Ecuador recognizes Afro-descendant people as a distinct cultural group, a legal structure which has political implications for issues such as land rights and distribution of government finances to support programs that protect Afro-Ecuadorian cultural integrity.ⁱⁱ

This level of political recognition did not emerge out of a unanimous consensus among different interest groups but instead out of indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian movements for social justice in the face of unequal administration of rights and allocation of national resources. Plurinationalism in particular emerged as a product of the 1990s movement for land rights by both indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, a term originally coined by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), to describe a more inclusive

ii In relationship to discourses of racial democracy, many countries in Latin America have made constitutional reforms related to land rights: “[a]fter centuries of ignoring, wishfully controlling, concessioning off, or ‘opening up’ these ostensibly ‘unoccupied national lands’ (*tierras baldías*), many Latin American governments now recognize indigenous and black land rights and have set out to demarcate and collectively title their claims.” (Offen 2003:43).

democratic framework for the future of Ecuador. Furthermore, Ecuador's Afro-descendant coastal population actively organized for constitutional recognition, which included land rights and collective rights as a *'pueblo'* (people) or a culturally distinct group of people. It was only in 1998 that the Ecuadorian state recognized Afro-Ecuadorians and outlined "a series of collective rights for them, including the right to collective ownership of their ancestral lands, the right not to be displaced from their lands, and the rights to participate in the development of renewable resources and be consulted prior to the extraction of non-renewable resources from their lands."⁷ Despite this important constitutional recognition of Afro-descendant peoples, the government included Afro-Ecuadorians as a sort of 'after-thought': "an add-on Article that followed the list of 12 indigenous collective rights in the 1998 Constitution permitted their application to Afro-Ecuadorians."⁸

Part of the struggle is material; Indigenous peoples and Afro Ecuadorians experience the highest rates of poverty in Ecuador across different variables (income inequality, basic needs, housing, education, etc.). The sociologist Victor Jijón quantifies Indigenous and Afro Ecuadorian poverty to show a general pattern that suggests the traditional discrimination of Indigenous and Afro Ecuadorians from mainstream Ecuadorian society. For example, of the people that participated in the 2001 Census of Population and Housing, 89.9% indigenous peoples reported unsatisfied basic needs, followed by 70.3% of the Afro Ecuadorian population.⁹ However, these material measures of quality of life are not the only factors that have contributed to the movement for constitutional recognition of Afro-Ecuadorians and various indigenous groups. Another part of the resistance has to do with addressing a history of negative representations with historical origins rooted in the first encounters of Spanish colonizers in 'New World,' as well as the transatlantic slave trade. Across Latin America, the legacy of colonial encounters is still observable through different facets of present-day discourses and movement such that in 2010, a United Nations Report

...identified 'negative representation' of Ecuadorians of African descent in the media as a persistent legacy of past discrimination, while also underscoring that the country's

2008 Constitution, in particular the Law on Collective Rights, recognized the rights and protection of vulnerable groups including people of African descent, which was assessed as a positive attempt to combat the population's disenfranchisement.¹⁰

The effects upon a population of people historically marginalized from the state economically, socially, and politically are mediated through modes of representation, including forms of artistic expression. These representations are central to the construction of identity and politics. However, in order to understand the multiple meanings produced through music and dance, it is necessary to analyze how racialized categories of difference formed during the early colonial period, later providing the foundation for the Ecuadorian state, and have informed Ecuador's contemporary 'plurinational' framework.

A HISTORY OF RACIALIZED CATEGORIES OF DIFFERENCE

Beginning in the sixteenth century with Spanish colonial presence in the Americas, Spanish categories of difference combined with colonial realities in centuries-long processes that later became termed *mestizaje* (miscegenation). Peter Wade's work largely deals with the historical development of *mestizaje* tracing the history of race in Spain, particularly emphasizing the concept of purity of blood (*limpieza de sangre*): "the American colonies added an explicit racism to prejudices of birth and religion encompassed in the classic Spanish concept of 'purity of blood,'" previously used to identify non-Christians.¹¹ As Wade argues, the concept of 'purity of blood' was reproduced by colonial administrators in the Americas in order to understand relationships of human difference, particularly between colonizers and different groups of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants. The result was a system of hierarchical ranking based on proximity to the broadly fixed racial categories of Spanish, Indigenous, and African.

These differences were further influenced by the priest Bartolomé de las Casas in the early sixteenth century. Also known as the 'Protector of the Indians,' Casas argued that 'Indians' have souls and should not be used for slave labor. Instead, he "recommended the massive importation of Black Africans to take over the animal tasks heretofore largely relegated to native Americans."¹² Casas

assertions are particularly insightful into the way in which 'Black Africans' have been historically ranked as inhuman within a Hispanic-centric racial hierarchy and treated accordingly through systems of enslavement throughout the colonial period up until the nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth century, *mestizaje* (miscegenation) as a framework for thinking about human difference became central in defining what it meant to claim sovereignty in Latin America, including in Ecuador. Trends of locating human difference in race through scientific and biological explanations, the predominant discourse of *mestizaje* (miscegenation) reflected a sort of soft eugenics in its progression towards lightness. The projects of nation building across Latin America often proved that, "race itself could also form the basis of nation-building projects, centered on representing the nation as...racially mixed (or sometimes, rather white) and, in any case, racially democratic."¹³ This idyllic racial democracy would mean that all Ecuadorian citizens would have equal access to political processes and governmental services, regardless of associative racial identity categories. However, this "racially democratic" political rhetoric failed to address the effects of a history of racism and discrimination that by that time had already marginalized many communities within Ecuador and created unequal quality of life and political access across the country.

Framed by these Hispanic-centric ideologies stemming from *mestizaje*, Gran Colombia—a territory that encompassed much of northern South America including present day Ecuador—gained independence from the Spanish Empire on May 24, 1822. The fight for independence came at a time when Enlightenment ideas critiquing divine right were flourishing, simultaneously as ideas of nationalism spread in Europe. Benedict Anderson argues that national identities in the Americas formed as a combination of the networks created by colonial administrative units and print capitalism, a theory emphasizing the centrality of the printing press within a capitalist system. These networks created an imaginative space for politics and trade to expand. In plain terms, administrative categories and economic units became meaningful to people through public social life and commerce, activities to which indigenous and Afro-descendants were denied access. Print capitalism increased the communication

of ideas, reinforcing the networks of people representative of different colonial administrative units: the connection between "this marriage with that ship, this price with that bishop" was the "very structure of the colonial administration and market system itself."¹⁴ The growing sense of connectedness brought on by print capitalism in conjunction with Enlightenment ideas, local politics, and economics contributed to the formation of an identity unique from the Spanish Empire, followed by distinct nationalist sentiments within Gran Colombia. Anderson argues that the Spanish Empire's increasing control over the colonies contributed to the lack of communication between administrative and economic units within Latin America. This lack of communication between regions and the competition within political and economic spheres later contributed to the dissolution of Gran Colombia into different nations.

By 1830, Ecuador had claimed independence from Gran Colombia. In the new Ecuadorian nation, birth in the New World no longer meant secondary Spanish status, but instead first-class Ecuadorian citizenship, consolidated in the ideal *mestizo* citizen. The creation of the Ecuadorian state was very much rooted in earlier Spanish colonial identity and networks; again, it was largely at the exclusion of both Indigenous and Afro-descendent contributions to economic and political life, whether it be through the active exclusion of Indigenous and Afro-descendant people from sociopolitical participation or through the devalorization of their distinct cultural practices.¹⁵ The conflation of the *mestizo* identity with racial democracy resulted in "monocultural *mestizaje*," a term coined by Rahier.¹⁶ It denotes "the ideologies in which the prototypical national identity has been imagined as a *mestizo* identity to which would correspond a single national culture, itself the product of a particular history of cultural hybridity between, mostly, Spain and Native America, commonly at the exclusion of African contributions."¹⁷ "Monocultural *mestizaje*" implied the invisibility of Afro-descendant peoples on a national level both materially (e.g. economic allocation of national resources) and imaginatively in the creation of *mestizo* as belonging to the nation and anything else as "other" and, by extension, not a priority in national politics.

THE EMERGENCE OF PLURINATIONALISM

The *mestizo* as the archetypal citizen has been the dominant paradigm for understanding citizenship in Ecuador until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As a result of Indigenous and Black activist movements, as well as shifting international politics of legitimate governance, discourses of multiculturalism, interwoven with environmental justice movements, have emerged across Latin America. One result of these movements is the creation of plurinationalism, also referred to as multinationalism, in South America.

While the plurinational framework seeks to protect rights of marginalized peoples, Ecuadorian lawmakers and activists alike are confronted with the challenge of how to understand human difference from the legacy of *mestizaje*. Plurinationalism challenges the racial hierarchy solidified by a single archetypal citizen, providing a national image of a nation of nations. *Mestizaje* and *multinacionalidad* are thus often interpreted as two conflicting ideologies to describe the historical development of many South American countries. For example, Whitten associates *mestizaje* with the elite class and *multinacionalidad* with *el pueblo* (the people), but argues that both ideologies “constitute multivocalic metatropes that may serve as polarizing symbols or as condensing symbols.”^{18, iii} Furthermore, *mestizaje* and “the adoption of a national image of mixedness by no means contradicted the continued existence of racism.”¹⁹ However, it was more difficult to talk about in terms of racial discrimination because of the logic that if the Ecuadorian citizen is a product of *mestizaje*, he will be equally accepting of all parts of himself that converged in the ideal citizen—including his European, Indigenous and African roots. “...[I]t was possible to eulogize mixture in the abstract spirit of national unity, while also discriminating against non-white people in everyday practice, especially if they were seen as ‘barbaric.’”²⁰ Part of these everyday practices include the environmental exploitation and pollution of areas inhabited by predominantly Afro-descendants of Indigenous peoples. But, just as “monocultural *mestizaje*” ostensibly unified Ecuador under a certain “inclusive” framework, plurinationalism seeks to unify the country under a different framework representing a new kind of

iii *El pueblo* (the people) is a culturally significant term as well as a central component to populism, particular relevant in Ecuador which holds the record for most popular impeachments in Latin America (Zamosc 2013, 238).

democracy that must still confront a legacy of racial hierarchy.

Therefore, though oppositional in political discourse, plurinationality and *mestizaje* are perhaps not too far apart in their presuppositions that different bounded races of people and culture are organized by the Ecuadorian state and awarded rights through the state. They are two racialized frameworks in conversation with one another, multinationality (or plurinationality) directly addressing the unfulfilled promise of “equality” for Ecuador. The work remains to create new modes of understanding, communication, and distribution that do not reproduce racist or exclusionary economic, political, and social institutions. One part of this work is the creation of representations of Afro-descendants in Ecuador and a study of how meaning and significance are assigned to the category of “Afro-Ecuadorian” identity.

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY & NARRATIVES OF AFRO-ECUADOR

In Ecuadorian history textbooks, representations of Afro-descendants have long been limited to either a picture of a marimba or someone dancing to the marimba with little explanation or mention of much else. However, Afro-descendants have a history of cultural production and intellectual work, offering unique and nationally significant perspectives on the development of the country and the notions of freedom that make up the founding principles of the Republic. This section presents a brief introduction to Afro-descendant history and presence in the region, followed by an analysis of the construction of historical perspectives ranging from the twentieth century to the present day.

The first historical accounts of Afro-descendant presence in Esmeraldas, Ecuador are from the mid-sixteenth century after a shipwreck, from which enslaved Africans escaped and formed a fortified community along the coast known as *palenque* (palisade). Peter Wade describes the *palenque* as particularly significant to the Chocó province of New Granada (Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador).²¹ By the sixteenth century, the region of Esmeraldas became what many scholars including Whitten and Estupiñán refer to as “a ‘*zambo* republic,’ *zambo* being the colonial designation for ‘African-Indian mixture.’”²² Though Afro-descendants living within the “*zambo*

republic” were not enslaved, their official status in relationship to the state was primarily influenced by the existence of slavery and its association with blackness. Slavery was largely institutionalized in other regions of Ecuador, most notably in current-day Valle del Chota in the Province of Imbabura. The institution of slavery was, in fact, incorporated into the very creation of the Ecuadorian state: “Upon their backs, the whip inscribed the laws of slavery, drawing from those letters the blood that would transform into the flag and the poem of liberty.”²³ This assertion captures the irony of the rhetoric of freedom from the Spanish alongside the enslavement of Afro-descendants and the material contribution of the products of slavery to the Ecuadorian nation. Ironically, liberty did not preclude the existence of slavery.

Numerous Afro-Ecuadorian historical accounts suggest that the concept of Ecuadorian freedom is not only defined by liberation from the Spanish empire but more fundamentally by the abolition of slavery, equating black identity in Ecuador to resistance and freedom. Many Afro-Ecuadorian pedagogical trends emphasize the origins of the African presence in the region and the transatlantic slave trade as a significant part of Ecuadorian history; as survivors of the transatlantic slave trade, they were present before the foundation of the Ecuadorian nation. It is this history of overcoming slavery, which symbolizes Afro-descendant struggle as the ultimate symbol of freedom.²⁴ Furthermore, many Afro-descendants, though not included in the history textbooks, participated in the war of independence against Spain and were “great protagonists in the Liberal Revolution.”²⁵ This retelling of a history of Afro-descendants fighting for “Ecuadorian freedom” is also present in the book *El Negro en Esmeraldas* (The Black Man in Esmeraldas), in which Julio Estupiñán Tello argues that “[t]he libertarian Ecuadorian spirit is in debt to Esmeraldas, for being the land of black people, symbol, bastion of Resistance against the conquistador in defense of liberty.”²⁶

As an Afro-descendent intellectual from Esmeraldas, Estupiñán makes propositions about Ecuadorian history that have significantly influenced the perceptions and ideas of many other Afro-Ecuadorian intellectuals and artists involved in various forms of cultural activism. By including Afro-

Ecuadorian figures in his work, Estupiñán sets forth a vision of Ecuadorian history that challenges the existing hegemonic historical accounts of *mestizaje*. He also critiques the way in which Ecuador’s collective memory condenses Bolívar’s and Urbina’s images with the abolition of slavery. Though they played an important role in the legislative abolition of slavery, this abolition did not necessarily reflect a reality of freedom for previous enslaved peoples: “the empires did not fall, nor did the republic end, nor did the white men die. It was a new conditioning of the man for social function. A new concept of liberty and rights, a new concept of humanity and religion that returned the negro to his condition of being human, incorporating him into a civilized role on the land,” no matter the inferiority of that role.²⁷ To support this argument, Estupiñán analyzes the system of *concertaje* (sharecropping) established after the abolition of slavery in 1542, which left many Afro-descendants impoverished and taken advantage of by land owners.²⁸

As Estupiñán offers a twentieth century retelling of Ecuadorian history, Afro-descendant artists today are also part of Estupiñán’s legacy of cultural activism, constructing and performing meaning and memory of Afro-descendant history. The historical debates presented by Estupiñán are paralleled in contemporary discussions about how Afro-Ecuadorians contribute much more to the image of Ecuador than they receive in return—particularly as many Afro-descendant communities struggle in the face of environmental exploitation and pollution from gold mining and oil production with little to no protection from the state. One marimba dancer, Mario Boboy, argues, “[t]he marimba is something autochthonous to our land...and they [government figures] say, “Ok, we have to acknowledge them,” because we [marimba artists] have given many successes to this institution...they are in debt to us. Because what they have given us is little for what we have given to them.”²⁹ Boboy elaborates on the way that marimba has represented the provincial government both nationally and internationally, winning it much popularity. This popularity functions on two levels: one in cultural achievement and one in plurinationalistic liberal ideals of representation, acceptance, and support of diversity within the Ecuadorian state.

Another common explanation for why

the government is in debt to Afro-Ecuadorians is linked to tourism. Many artists expressed dismay at the government's lack of responsibility addressing different ideas for cultural programs that artists had proposed. Boboy suggests that these projects never become realized because "the government doesn't focus on long-term development. If you dance now, they applaud and it's all good. But tomorrow they forget. We are tourism. We make money. It's not the government, it is us."³⁰ He suggests that Afro-Ecuadorian cultural practices, particularly the marimba, serve as economic capital in attracting tourists and that compensation through more governmental projects that support spaces for cultural development and innovation should be funded.

Estupiñán's writing is significant in the context of Ecuador's plurinationality today because of the particular vision of development, civilization, and liberty that he proposes. It is not a separatist vision but a call for incorporation into the benefits of state participation, including electricity, clean drinking water, environmental justice, and other civil rights as defined by the constitution—which would be extended to include cultural rights. In my conversations with many Afro-descendant artists and activists, many had different expectations of the state's role in contributing to their work and their livelihoods. Despite these differences, all but one out of eighty-three interviewees agreed that the government still had much to do in relationship to supporting the livelihoods and cultural production of Afro-descendant peoples.

Just as Afro-Ecuadorian people are diverse, definitions of Afro-Ecuadorian identity are inevitably contradictory given people's varying experiences and opinions. Artistic expression, specifically "traditional" music and dance, is by no means the only way or an all-inclusive way of understanding the identity-making processes of all Afro-descendants in Ecuador or Esmeraldas. However, the image created through performance within government institutions has particular rhetorical power because of the way it figures into the political representation of Afro-Ecuadorian people and also because it serves as a legitimization of their existence and rights. While "[m]ost analysts believe that the elaboration of nationalist discourse has always been the work of self-consciously patriotic

ideologues and visionaries...the transformation of such sentiments into a more formal, more forceful system of ideas is the work of particular individuals and organizations."³¹ I now consider the significance of this "cultural work" through the exploration of a long-standing symbol of Afro-descendant identity and resistance in Esmeraldas, Ecuador: the marimba.

The term marimba is used to describe a genre of music as well as an instrument featured in that genre of music. Moreover, it is considered a form of Afro-descendant cultural production both in the past and present. The section that follows is a presentation of the stories and ideas from different Afro-descendant artists about their lives and understandings of identity. I listened to the way in which people identified themselves and described their work as meaningful and often times as part of family traditions.^{iv} Through these interactions, I began to observe how people actively constructed ideas and narratives through marimba performances—considered a form of "traditional" dance and music—whether through conscious choreography or spontaneous improvisation. To explore the ways in which marimba contributes to Afro-Ecuadorian identity, I propose a mosaicked analytical approach, which will include a brief history of the marimba, the current discourse of "saving culture" in which the marimba is practiced, the stories and ideas of Afro-descendant artists, and finally, a site analysis of a marimba performance. Each of these distinct analytical lenses offers different insights into the way in which Afro-Ecuadorian identity is actively constructed today, demonstrating the complexity and multiplicity of meanings and ideas negotiated in forming the categorization of "Afro-Ecuadorian."

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MARIMBA

Some of the most lasting and pervasive stereotypes about Afro-descendants in the Americas can be understood through an analysis of the role that performed expressions play in racial stereotyping in Latin America, particularly related to sexuality and morality. Iberian notions of the "other" were "deeply sexualized" and influenced by earlier Greek conceptions of the uncivilized: "Unbridled sexuality was a key feature, as it was for the ancient Greeks: 'it is barbarians or non-Greeks who flaunt their

iv Most artists in Esmeraldas learn to play music or to dance informally like Guido Nazareno: "I started dancing at home in the garden with my family all around me" (Interview, July 21, 2014).

sexuality quite shamelessly: and so Herodotus reports that the natives of the Caucasus region copulate in the open like animals.”³² This historical association of blackness with degeneracy and sexuality was reinforced, if not centered, in religious institution and ideology: “The institutions that were pursuing witches or prosecuting religious heterodoxy were imposing a moral-sexual order and at the same time sorting people into racial categories, especially because those who fell into the categories of indigenous, black and mixed-race were commonly seen as religiously and sexually heterodox.”³³ To many religious institutions and its followers, the heterodoxy of the “other” was translated onto those cultural practices of the other, including music and dance. From this context, marimba came to be regarded as “music of the devil.” Although some church institutions today, such as the Pastoral Afro, have accepted marimba as a legitimate and valuable form of cultural expression, other religious institutions and many of their Afro-descendant members consider marimba and “culture” more broadly as sinful and, to a certain extent, a waste of time.

Though marimba was considered “music of the devil,” it was not suppressed given the relative autonomy of Esmeraldas as a region until the nineteenth century. This autonomy in Esmeraldas allowed for a “distinct cultural synthesis...largely independent of the highland mestizo influences.”³⁴ The musical and dance expressions of many Afro-descendants centered around the *currulao*, the marimba dance or party which took place in *casas de marimba* (marimba houses) at least once a week.^v In this context, Ritter suggests that the marimba was a significant part of people’s lives both as a form of cultural expression as well as a figurative symbol:

“As the dominant musical and cultural expression of freed or escaped slaves living in a quasi-autonomous state, the *currulao*’s association with liberation was perhaps implicit more than expressly stated, but the space was nonetheless distinctly created and defined by the sound of the marimba orchestra and the boundaries of the dance floor.”³⁵

The marimba, present in the *currulao* as a primarily social space, was also a significant part of other forms of Afro-descendant artistic expression from literature and poetry through which the marimba occupied a “central location, metaphorically and spatially, in their depictions of black life in the province.”³⁶

The increased incorporation of Esmeraldas into the national framework and market economy took place by waves of migration, the first brought on by exploration of mineral wealth in Esmeraldas and the second in the 1950s because of new roads and the first transnational oil pipeline. These migrations oftentimes brought with them environmental pollution, negatively affecting the livelihoods of previous residents. Furthermore, this incorporation was not a simple question of migration or an equal exchange of ideas. Instead, it became a suppression of Afro-descendant cultural expression and an imposition of racialized and sexualized frameworks of difference and disapproval. Ritter argues that “[u]rbanization and the search for wage labor emptied many of the upriver towns that had once been strongholds of traditional life.”³⁷ Simultaneously, marimba practice increasingly became a target of suppression by new local officials: “Unsympathetic to local customs, new city officials began requiring permits for black residents to hold marimba dances, restricting the number of performance opportunities and eventually lowering participation due to the cost of the necessary bribe.”³⁸ Ritter illustrates this suppression through the novel *Juyungo* by Adalberto Ortiz, in which a police officer announces, “[F]rom this date on, it is expressly forbidden to hold marimba dances in the central parts of the city inasmuch as it constitutes an attack on order, morality, and the good customs of civilized people.”³⁹ Though the novel is fiction, it reflects a societal climate hostile towards marimba confirmed by oral accounts of the banning of marimba in the provincial capital of Esmeraldas (Esmeraldas City) in the earlier twentieth century.^{vi}

v “These privately-owned dwellings were a focal point for Afro-Ecuadorian communities, used for civic meetings, recreation, and providing the performance space for the *currulao*. Norman Whitten, Jr. has written extensively on the symbolic integration of the marimba dance as a secular ritual and its importance within Afro-Ecuadorian cultures in Esmeraldas” (Ritter 1999, 2).

vi The artists that Ritter interviewed in 1996 and 1997 reassert the suppression of marimba, recounting that it was banned in the early part of the twentieth century. Some of my interviewees also recounted this story, while most made no mention to the history of suppression of the marimba in relationship to their work today suggesting perhaps a certain degree of removal from the past in popular collective consciousness. This is partially why many people today argue for multicultural education in which the history of Afro-descendants in Ecuador is part of all public school curriculums.

This decline in the practice of marimba is the context during which Afro-descendant artists began to form folklore groups, including two of the most well-known in Esmeraldas—*Jolgorio* and *Cuero, Son y Pambil*. Almost all of the artists I interviewed had trained in dance and music with the latter group. Furthermore, it is from this context that we arrive at the current manner in which marimba is practiced and maintained in the city of Esmeraldas: through folklore groups, classroom instruction, and an overarching discourse of “*rescate cultural*” (the saving of culture).

RESCATE CULTURAL/SAVING AFRO-ECUADORIAN CULTURE

The phrase “*rescate cultural*” (saving culture) is widely used by artists and activists to talk about Afro-Ecuadorian culture today. The need to “save” a culture implies that there is either something to be saved or that something is disappearing. Additionally, in order to save culture or cultural practice, there is a tendency to create a fixed notion of what that culture or cultural practice is. Anthropologist Sally Merry suggests, “[T]o some extent the claims to cultural rights demand assertions of cultural authenticity that resonate with earlier anthropological conceptions of culture...in other words, making these claims in terms of an essentialized, homogeneous, ‘traditional’ culture.”⁴⁰ These claims are made through the active construction of representations; in this case, choreographies and musical compositions demonstrate “unique cultural characteristics.”

On the other hand, one interviewee queried: “How can Afro-Ecuadorian culture disappear when there are Afro-Ecuadorian people? Won’t people always have culture?” Handler asks a similar question when describing the discourse of cultural survival in Quebec as “[t]he negative vision of the struggle for survival [which] presupposes the positive vision of collective unity and maturity—for how can an entity that does not in the first place exist run the risk of disintegration?”⁴¹ This question is a proposition for a shifting notion of what culture means, in concordance with contemporary anthropological definitions of fluidity and transformation. Just as people transform, so does “culture,” which is reflective of their identities and ways of living in the world.

However, the focus of the movement to save

culture is part of a larger social, political, and cultural movement in Esmeraldas. This movement incorporates many residents of Esmeraldas and Afro-descendant people in an effort to understand the transformations that are happening in their lives, including environmental changes that make long-used materials for making instruments hard to find. Residents further question why certain cultural practices, such as playing marimba, are disappearing or becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. In debates within and around this movement, “Afro-Ecuadorian culture” is sometimes conflated with particular facets of life, such as music and dance. It is often represented reductively by a single symbol—in many cases, the marimba. This was often expressed in terms of personal definitions of black identity:

We are the material authors; if we weren’t here as authors perhaps the culture of Esmeraldas wouldn’t be known...lots of people think that in Ecuador there are no black people. But there are a lot of black people in Esmeraldas. Black people that make black music.⁴²

Bairon Angulo serves as the current artistic director of *Africa Negra* (Black Africa), the official marimba group of the Municipal Government of Esmeraldas. The group formed under the power of the first black Mayor of Esmeraldas, Ernesto Estupiñán Quintero. The marimba was taken as a political campaign symbol representative of Afro-Ecuadorian resilience and its importance for the region of Esmeraldas as a whole. As part of this project, *Africa Negra*, a group of musicians and dancers, performs traditional Afro-Ecuadorian music and dances, largely centered on the marimba. The activities of *Africa Negra*—its practice sessions, bus rides to different shows, and numerous performances—create spaces for both artists and audience members to reflect on identity, existence, and self-expression. This work figures into a broad obligation to “save culture.” Part of the artists’ work is in creating and maintaining a space in which people have the opportunity to learn about Afro-descendants in Ecuador and artistic practices that reflect histories and experiences that are excluded from mainstream narratives. The musician Julio Padilla explained the importance of marimba and its relationship to Esmeraldas and regional identity:

“When we speak of national music, we are talking about the music...that most represents the country in general. The marimba is the most

representative within Esmeraldas... Within the province of Esmeraldas, each sector has its own identity. That's why in Esmeraldas, the marimba is most representative."⁴³

Padilla presents a vision of identity split up into governmental sectors and majority representation within Esmeraldas as the representation of the region and its people. Padilla's comment reflects a sort of logic of nationalisms as a style of cultural production that Spencer elaborates as "all of whom are concerned to uncover, create, protect, or restore the true culture of the nation."⁴⁴ This logic is also observable in the ways that artists describe and perform marimba as a representation of "Afro-Ecuadorian" culture. Debates about authenticity all hinge around the creation of cultural representation—a question of existence in both its physical and political discursive manifestations. Artists, as well as "cultural activists," are concerned that marimba should articulate continuity with the past, as well as a continued distinction and affirmation in inclusion within the state.

The concerns for national recognition and respect are directly linked to the personal aspirations of artists to create brighter futures for their families. One of Angulo's life goals is to live from Afro-Esmeraldeñan music:

Not with Latino music, no. With my black music, with the marimba which runs in my blood. My kids have to know that this is their identity, that this is their father, that this is their mother, that this is their family. And because of this, their father provided food for them to eat... they have to know where it comes from and from thereon forward, they can choose another path, that depends on them.⁴⁵

Angulo wants to create a clear connection between a sort of survival—that which food provides—with the survival of music and dance practices which he sees as central to his own identity, existence and self-expression. He continues,

This is the mission of a group of cultural historians that have made a compromise with the art. We have gone through hunger, rain storms, a million things that you couldn't imagine. And it shouldn't be this way. Much have we cried, but we are here standing on our feet. Because we do not want this to be lost. Because this—how can I tell you—it's our identity... a people without identity

is a people that is nothing, that doesn't exist."⁴⁶

Angulo expresses a sense of urgency to define this identity and fight for it because he equates marimba with his identity and, in turn, with his own existence and the existence of those in his community. It is in the creation of these identities that the tensions of plurinationalism and racial/ethnic identity formation discussed in the previous section come to light. Furthermore, Angulo and other artists reiterate the obligation that researchers, like myself, have in keeping Afro-Ecuadorian cultural practices such as the marimba alive.

BECOMING AN AFRO-ECUADORIAN ARTIST

The cultural representations created through the marimba are politically significant for the Afro-descendant communities today because of the current political climate that creates legislation explicitly valorizing these expressions. Despite the tendency to organize around bounded identity categories, Afro-descendant artistic expression is fluid and in constant construction; this is evidenced through the lived experiences of artists and the different intentions and meanings they cultivate from their work. One singer, Sonia España, highlights the ways in which art weaves in and out of her life, complicating the longstanding narrative of marimba and Afro-Ecuadorian music as a representation of a sort of fixed 'authentic' Afro-Ecuadorian identity. Similarly challenging an essentialized Afro-Ecuadorian music or dance, young artistic director Darwin Quintero aims to reinvent and reinterpret longstanding themes within the Afro-Esmeraldeñan dance repertoire. Their stories and perspectives shed light on the work of creating cultural representation.

Sonia España began singing for money on a bus to make ends meet, long before she began publicly performing what is considered Afro-Ecuadorian music. Today, she is one of the singers in the group *Africa Negra*, as well as the director of two Afro-Ecuadorian artistic performance groups, *Manantial* and *Bonguiar*. Her career as an artist largely arose from the need to provide for herself and her daughter rather than from an inclination for artistic or cultural expression. She explains, "The reality is I never thought I'd end up in this... artistic life, I never thought I would. It was just something, you know? Life's necessities, and soon, I just found myself

singing folkloric music.”⁴⁷ As she began a career in “folklore,” España confronted the discursive weight of Afro-Ecuadorian culture in the broader music scene, which had both economic and symbolic implications. She began to identify as a “singer of folklore.” This became clear when España produced a CD with a popular singer Margarita Lazo, followed by events and concerts in theaters where Afro-Ecuadorian identity was a significant part of the performance.

“But I also saw that folkloric music had economy. Because popular music, I sang in the buses and I was singing in the buses, I mean, I got on the buses, sang, and people would give money [*colaborar*], right? But it wasn’t like they would invite me to a, a show and soon a program and would say to me come, you’re going to sing music, popular music, no. I made a living like this, I mean with this, I had enough money for my house.”⁴⁸

Here, “folklore” is presented as a different class of work, the “mature” performance versus the more basic “street” performance. These assumptions and valuations of different types of performance in relationship to Afro-Ecuadorian identity are not inherent but constructed. For España, “folklore,” or, in other words, what the general public and other artists define as uniquely Afro-Ecuadorian, affords her higher valuation and broader recognition as an artist. She is no longer simply another black woman on the streets of Esmeraldas struggling to support her family; instead, España transforms into an Afro-Ecuadorian artist—representative of the multiculturalist discourse which “respects” Afro-Ecuadorian culture.

However, what is this Afro-Ecuadorian performance, how is it defined, and by-whom? Finally, what is this “authentic” Afro-Ecuadorian performance that is valued such that it is deemed fit for CD collaborations followed by programs and theater shows? Perhaps this “authenticity” comes from history: Afro-Ecuadorian cultural expressions have developed partly in isolation from the more nationally mainstream music and dance forms because of the particular history of marginalization of Esmeraldas. Afro-Ecuadorian music also uses the marimba, an instrument derivative of African instruments. These unique geophysical and political parameters work their way into the family history of Darwin Quintero, director of a marimba group

at one of the universities in Esmeraldas: “We are descendants of Africa but we are what we have created within Ecuador, my grandparents.” With great respect, Quintero recalled his grandfather, a great musician. He says, “dance in itself has nothing to do with politics. But when I dance, I want to save the cultural manifestations,” referring to those “manifestations” created by his ancestors which document the history of Afro-descendant presence in Esmeraldas.”⁴⁹

However, authenticity in both Quintero’s and España’s experience is largely constructed and more aligned with Edward Bruner’s critique of “authenticity.” According to Bruner, “authenticity implies the existence of a true original, an authentic, and the French poststructuralists have shown that there are no originals, only endless reproductions. Everyone enters society in the middle.”⁵⁰ Both España and Quintero are examples of ‘enter[ing] in the middle.’⁵¹ This argument at once argues against any fixed notion of authenticity but also must lead us to question its essentializing nature.

This is a particularly relevant definition of authenticity and its conceptual imagery, given the increased migration of many Afro-Ecuadorians to cities and the exchange of different cultural practices and artistic expressions, particularly the rise in popularity of *reggaetón* among today’s Afro-Ecuadorian youth.⁵² In Bruner’s definition, authenticity is in fact a sort of myth and often functions as an imagined legitimization of cultural expressions. Bruner argues falsely imagined authenticity positions the “native performer” “in a discourse not of their making.”⁵³ The representations of Afro-descendant culture as timeless and falsely “values” it rhetorically while depoliticizing it at the same time; this takes the culture out of its historical context and isolates it in the present market and multicultural discourse. García makes a similar critique about the state of Afro-Ecuadorian activism today, arguing that Afro history has been silenced through erasure and a lack of contextualization of cultural practices.^{vii} However, Quintero emphasizes

vii “I don’t believe that this government, the Ecuadorian State, or any other government for that matter, wants or knows how to confront the historic debt it has with the Afro-Ecuadorian community. I say that it does not know how because it does not know history or the perspective of the Afro community. It knows a national history where we Afros form a very small part, if at all, but supposedly we have done nothing, we have given nothing. And because they have not measured the debt as a contribution to a people that against its will had to give much work to this [state and national] construction, it is assumed that there is no debt, or need for reparation. The majority think that they are being included, and have an

a deep sense of belonging to Esmeraldas coupled with an agency to create cultural memory. In order to reinvent forms of Afro-descendant cultural production, Quintero suggests that the dancer should be free to interpret whatever themes are presented in the music, even if the steps do not traditionally match the music's theme. Though many dances already represent stories, it is the creation of different interpretations of those stories and representations that can give agency to the performer to transform culture. Looking to the future, Quintero sees dance as a way to a form of self-empowerment for youth, so that they see opportunity in artistic expression.

Finally, España's and Quintero's experiences performing "*Cuero, Son y Pambil*" (Leather, Sound and Pambil—a kind of palm tree) challenges the notion of an authentic Afro-Ecuadorian culture because of the repertoire of dances and songs that they had to learn. The authentic Afro-Ecuadorian essence that España performs in her life is largely learned and largely informed by Afro-Colombian interpretations of Afro performance, (because the director of '*Cuero, Son y Pambil*' is from Colombia) along with her own experience living as an Afro-Ecuadorian woman in Esmeraldas. The influence of Colombian artistic expression is not isolated to España or Quintero, as the vast majority of artists performing Afro-Ecuadorian music and dance in Esmeraldas City have at some point been in the same group, which is trained by the same director. This was confirmed in the majority of interviews I conducted, in which almost all of the artists said that they had either been in the group or learned from people that had been in the group. Both España's and Quintero's experiences begin to draw out larger themes within the world of artistic labor in Esmeraldas, such as identity formation as an Afro-descendant artist, the market value of 'folklore' music, and the ways that economic struggle shape artistic pursuit.

CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION: MARIMBA AND THE MARKET

All we have is in here [he points to his head],
from here emerges the marimba.

—Don
Hernán⁵⁴

equality of opportunities. The Afro community as a whole is not thinking about reparation and this seems to me to be a kind of historical dis-memory (*desmemoria histórica*) on our side" (García in Walsh 2012, 29).

The marimba, for us is our mother—for what it represents. It is a symbol, a national anthem, like a flag...For us, the marimba is life...it shouldn't have a price, right? But unfortunately, that's the way it is.

—Sonia España⁵⁵

Oswaldo Ruís insisted that we meet Don Hernán. He led us about three blocks up a shallow sloped hill. Borbón used to be just two parallel streets next to the river. Houses had sprung up since then, and the paved road ended at the top of the hill, where we made a right turn onto the gravel. Two blocks later, we had arrived at a concrete house at the end of the street. There, in front, stood an elderly, ghostly thin couple. They invited us in with a smile. The man walked with a cane and moved slowly into the concrete house. We sat down by the window. The house was bare, nothing on the walls and nothing in the kitchen. The trembling of his body, the trembling of his voice: "He robbed me."

His words hung heavy in the air. He would repeat this phrase over and over again throughout our conversation as a litany of his life's great injustice. His daughter came in and began to explain. When he was younger, he had played with the acclaimed artist, Papa Roncón. They had often traveled and performed together, but Papa Roncón never paid Don Hernán: "They used him. And now I'm the only one here to take care of my parents. But I have cancer and some days, I can barely walk."⁵⁶ The economic situation of Don Hernán contrasts heavily with that of Papa Roncón, who receives a steady income after winning the Eugenio Espejo National Award in 2011.^{viii} Despite Don Hernán's contributions to the community and to Marimba as a musician, he is recognized only by community members in Borbón, having been exploited and formally unacknowledged for his contributions to Papa Roncón's music.

The juxtaposition between the two men living less than a mile away from each other serves as a stark example of the exploitation seen within the music industry and what many interviewees referred to as "negative competition"—the economic benefit and recognition by the state of one at the expense

viii The Eugenio Espejo National Award is the highest honor awarded by the government of Ecuador for an individual that has achieved... The award includes a medal of honor, a gift of \$10,000 as well as a life pension of \$800/month. <http://www.culturaypatrimonio.gob.ec/premio-nacional-eugenio-espejo-edicion-2014/>.

of the other. Given the practical economic reality of artists who work to promote “Afro-Ecuadorian culture,” the purpose of the national recognition of this culture, as exemplified by the Eugenio Espejo National Award, has been put into question. The award is part of a local and national discourse that problematically promotes the “preservation of people” as “carriers” of culture or, as many people say, “guardians of tradition.”^{ix} While the award is an important gesture on behalf of the state to recognize the contributions of an individual to a community, as well as a potentially important symbolic gesture to nationally legitimize Afro-Ecuadorian culture, it ultimately has very little effect on the community—except for providing an incentive for others to aspire to reach a high level of “cultural achievement,” as put by recipient of the award in 2007, Petita Palma.⁵⁷

The Eugenio Espejo Award becomes a punctuated and concentrated expression of recognition by the state. Perhaps the award represents a discursive promise of an ever-deferred cultural recognition; however, this can never be a truly respectful acknowledgement of culture when continued economic marginalization and exploitation of Afro-Ecuadorians persists within the state. These awards appear to be more important symbolically for the state, which gains recognition for its performance of multiculturalism than for the actual people that make up that multicultural reality. The Eugenio Espejo award, thus, becomes an expression of the unequal distribution of state resources in “rewarding” culture on an individual level for its own benefit.

A large part of the Ecuadorian project of cultural patrimony is in an effort to transform the relationships between different ethnic and cultural groups such that the nation becomes a plurinational state, respecting the differences between all peoples, while maintaining a richness of culture. Don Hernán’s experience with the Eugenio Espejo Award incites a series of questions about the relationship between a discursive transformation in the valuation of Afro-Ecuadorian culture and the implications of that discourse on the performance and individual identities of Afro-Ecuadorian performers. Furthermore, the question of just how state discourse combines with the market economy

to form identity is particularly relevant in the case of Afro-Ecuadorian performance in Esmeraldas. This was particularly salient in a conversation I had where I asked Sonia España: “How do you put a price on culture?” To which she replied:

It shouldn’t have a price, right? But unfortunately, that’s the way it is...the problem with money is...it’s chaos here in Esmeraldas. And not just here. What happens is, if we put a price, there comes along other colleagues (*compañeros*) that they can call...let’s say *Tierra Negra*, *Tierra Verde*, *África Negra*, *Raíces del Pacífico*, etc...If they call me, and I tell them \$600, the person will complain and ask me for a discount. They’ll say, ok if this is it, think about it and give me a call. They find another person and this person will charge them \$400. And all of a sudden, another person will hear about this, and without being called, will find the connection and do it for \$200. This is a way in which our Afro Culture is not valued, through its dances, songs, *arrullos*. It’s not valued economically. Because people don’t want to pay the same way they pay a salsa group.⁵⁸

This was a common consensus among all the musicians that I interviewed. Another musician told me: “What [consumers] do when they want a show is they come ask us for a price. Once they get it they go around to all the other groups until they find the cheapest deal. They don’t care about quality.”⁵⁹ Many artists reiterated this same point. The economic pressures to perform in any circumstance and on whatever terms, ends up depoliticizing and domesticating the performance of Marimba such that, for artists, working in “cultural performance” becomes primarily driven by maximizing profits by lowering the price of performances in order to make a living. This market does not directly represent or include the discourse of resistance against the racism or environmental exploitation experienced in Afro-Ecuadorian communities nor speak to the social movement of empowering black identity. Instead, it appropriates Afro-descendant identity as an exotic difference. Ironically, while performances of marimba groups are monetarily devalued, salsa groups and *reggaetón* artists are able to charge much higher for their performances. One example of this is during Esmeraldas’ Festival of Culture. Instead of featuring local artists, the government paid a Colombian salsa group to come and perform—

ix There are numerous publications and books that use the very same language, including Juan García Salazar’s book, ‘Guardians of Tradition,’ containing oral traditions and histories.

travel expenses and housing included. Although the show was entertaining, many local artists argued that instead of outsourcing ‘culture,’ the government should take more action towards strengthening local cultural production, including distinct Afro-Ecuadorian forms of cultural production, such as the marimba.

Ultimately, the depoliticized use of “culture” is one of the challenges that many artists, as well as people, face in trying to make a living off of their artistic and cultural practices. This difficulty, in turn, discourages many artists from pursuing further creative possibilities in their expressions because they feel their extra effort does not make a difference—not to the audience and not to them in the form of economic compensation. Some artists do go on creating works and imagining new possibilities of expression, while many others find their time better served at another job in order to provide for their families.

The struggle for economic stability is part of a daily reality for many Afro-descendant artists and was part of the impetus for the formation of *Africa Negra*, whose members are paid salaries by the municipal government instead of getting paid by the show. One employee of the provincial government’s Department of Culture in Esmeraldas described the process by which most groups made a living performing marimba—an institution or organization will contact the office and fill out papers formally requesting the group to perform at an event. Customers include the government itself, oil companies, local festival organizers, schools, and individuals. Because the government subsidizes the group, *Africa Negra* begins charging at \$70 for a contract. This fee is much smaller compared to \$800-\$1,000 price that all other professional groups charge. Individuals or organizations ask for a performance of the group through the government, but if a group or a person does not have the means, they can solicit a show for free. There is no accountability process for determining whether someone can afford a show or not, so many ask for free performances.

Despite their salaried positions, all artists within the group stressed the financial burden of working as an artist. Most of the members of *Africa Negra* had second or third jobs to support their families. When asked whether or not people felt that the government, either locally or nationally, supported

Afro-Ecuadorian artists or opportunities for Afro-Ecuadorian artistic expression, the overwhelming majority of interviewees responded that, even if the government had done things in the past, there was not nearly enough support for artists or Afro-Ecuadorian cultural expression. This lack of support is reflected in the wages of artists and repeated sentiments: “*Sobrevivimos del chivo*” (We live from the side job), “*Este trabajo es super duro*” (This job is really difficult), and “*Es matador*” (It’s killer).

Though money and family subsistence is a critical part of the experience of many of the artists in Esmeraldas who work ‘in culture,’ paid performances are not the only spaces where music and dance are performed or created. There are many practices largely unrepresented across Esmeraldas, from personal celebrations to local festivals. Therefore, the artist has the challenge of creating representations of ‘Afro-Ecuadorianess’ that are ‘authentic.’ Laurence Prescott argues that artists, like Afro-Colombian poet Jorge Artel, sought the integration and the creation of “an authentic and whole national identity,” while at the same time, “laid bare the spiritual void and perennial paradox of a nation whose citizens lived relatively free from political oppression and racial persecution but were heavily burdened by shame and fear of the ‘colored’ roots of their reputedly proud mestizo identity.”⁶⁰ In other words, “at once part of the nation and yet marginalized within it, at once proud of their black heritage and yet committed to an integrated national culture,” the search to create authentic representations often leads to the reinforcement of stereotypes such as ‘innate black musicality.’⁶¹ These various debates and negotiations regarding identity become particularly contentious in politically charged setting. Following my exploration of ‘culture’ as labor, I turned to a site analysis of a dance performance that demonstrates the significance of performance as a point of contention and articulation between various different groups and interests. In this case, different groups include the state, an oil company, and local community members.

PERFORMING CULTURE: RECOGNITION AND REPRESENTATION

They practice in a garage basement. You could hear the beat of the *bombo* from the first floor. After walking down stairs and through a door, we found

the group. There were musicians on one end of the room with two *bombos* (bass drums), a *marimba*, a *guasá*, two smaller drums, and two singers. The dancers, three women and four men, filled the space and moved in formation. The artistic director of the group invited my partner and me to sit and observe the rehearsal. The musicians and dancers continued on fixing positioning and cleaning up spacing. This is where they met most days of the week for practice. They all belonged to *Africa Negra* (Black Africa), the official marimba group of the municipal government of Esmeraldas in Ecuador. One performance I attended was particularly insightful in understanding the role that marimba plays in the politics of environmental racism today.

It was a Friday afternoon when approximately twelve members of *Africa Negra* shuffled into a government truck to go to a school auditorium where representatives from *Oleoductos de Crudos Pesados* (OCP—Heavy Crude Pipeline)^x were holding an event for artisanal fishers with the headline: “61 families of Esmeraldas benefit...”^{xi} This event commemorated the signing of an agreement of cooperation between OCP and the *Isla Piedad* (Cooperative of Fishing Production), in which OCP invested \$30,000 for two fiber boats, two wood boats, maintenance kits, and a series of training workshops facilitated by Ecuador’s Ministry of Agriculture on how to use the fishing products.

To begin the event, everyone sang the National Anthem, followed by a ‘*Viva Ecuador!*’ (‘Long Live Ecuador’). The MC of the event reiterated that sixty-one families would benefit directly. ‘Gifts’ included a capacitation course and fishing maintenance kits that came in little duffle bags for the sixty-one fishing families. Given its history of oil spills^{xii} (e.g. OCP oil spill in 2013^{xiii}), OCP was still “perceived to be more amenable to community deliberation than state entities had been, and this became a key step for the province to revive an awareness of its own value

and importance.”⁶² The community’s effort to secure resources and investments from OCP is part of a recent history of activism and programs initiated by Mayor Estupiñán, who tried to address the fact that “local black culture, identity, and empowerment had long been discounted, undervalued, and subverted in the country, even though Ecuadorians of African descent made up about 70 percent of the province and 5-10 percent of the national population.”⁶³ It was during this time under Mayor Estupiñán that the first salaried government marimba group, *Africa Negra*, was formed.

Therefore, to conclude the event, the organizers called to the stage *Africa Negra* as a representation of ‘our ancestral music.’ They presented the performance as a symbol of good will and space for the artists to share part of themselves through their art form. Perhaps just as significant as the dance was the way in which the lead singer of the group contextualized the performance, reiterating how important this investment is for the community of Esmeraldas and explicitly recalling the broader context of “all that has happened,” hinting at the history of environmental racism and discrimination, particularly for Afro-descendants. Following the introduction, the lead singer began singing about the beauty of Esmeraldas as a region and praising its rich culture in a direct juxtaposition to the risk of oil contamination, a danger which many residents of Esmeraldas continue to face. Jonathan Ritter suggests that this attention to “the songs, texts, and choreography of marimba performances themselves suggests some of the ways that Afro-Ecuadorians have insisted upon their own agency within often-compromised performance spaces and venues.”⁶⁴ In this particular situation, the lead singer reclaims the space by explicitly framing the performance in relationship to the past suffering of the Afro-descendant community. However, for the lead singer and many of the dancers and musicians, their performance is about vitality—their happiness, strength and continued thriving, particularly through cultural expressions of dance and music.

The musical introduction presented a dignified image of Esmeraldas, its people, and its significant Afro-descendant heritage. To this call, six dancers came out dressed in bright colors, primarily orange and yellow. There were three women and three men. The women wore long skirts, which they used to create shapes in space as well as to exaggerate

x The second trans-Ecuadorian pipeline, built between 2001 and 2003 (Widener 2011, 10).

xi See news “61 Families in Esmeraldas Benefit”: <http://ocpecuador.com/en/sala-de-prensa/documentacion/boletines/61-familias-de-esmeraldas-se-benefician>. 22 May, 2015.

xii In 2009, OCP’s first break dumped approximately 14,000 gallons of oil in the Santa Rosa River affecting communities that used the river as a source of water including different indigenous communities, farmers and ranchers (Widener 2011, 265).

xiii See “Environmental catastrophe in Esmeraldas at the hand of the OCP”: <http://www.ecuadortimes.net/2013/04/09/environmental-catastrophe-in-esmeraldas-at-the-hands-of-the-ocp/> Accessed on May 22, 2015.

repeated turning sequences; their male counterparts used handkerchiefs and hats to exaggerate their movement in space. The men and women were continuously oppositional in the choreography, intermingling and separating again, often dancing in pairs and forming new spatial arrangements. The constant motion and continuous flow of skirts and handkerchief created a festive atmosphere driven by the beat of the *bombo*, a deep base drum. The artists represent their personal selves but are also part of a larger project, which, through marimba, creates a physical space for the creative expression of *negritud* defined as “the entire social, cultural, and economic project of blackness as an ethnic ideology,” which, “creates space of difference at the intersection of competing spheres of influence.”⁶⁵

However, in this space, the existing tension between the artist and the audiences makes the space more complicated. In a single performance, both the artist and the audience members form part of the meaning-making process that takes place in the moment. The presence of the group and its performance was a symbolic show of respect and pride for the region’s culture, a symbol of a “national,” “multicultural” richness. By extension, marimba helped create a positive image of OCP Ecuador, making it “more richly, more diversely human” despite OCPs environmental track record.⁶⁶ In this way, the marimba performance as part of the event structure was arguably appropriated by the corporation, contextualized in such a way as to distract all audiences, even momentarily, from the continued unequal relationship between OCP Ecuador and the residents of Esmeraldas. But, again, despite a history of oil spills among other environmental problems caused by the pipeline, many people are genuinely thankful for OCP’s investment. As expressed by one leader of the cooperative: “[f]or us, it has been of utmost importance that they have realized, that they have extended their hand to us, and we have emerged from that place where we were once invisible.”⁶⁷ OCP is able to ‘greenwash’ their image, simultaneously providing a marginalized community with more resources than the nation has traditionally bothered to provide for them.

This tension is visible in the theoretical distinction between performance and performativity. On one hand, performance is defined as a concept

that emphasizes the agency of the individual and their challenging of societal structures, whereas performativity “challenges the notion of individuals as free-will actors to show how these individuals are enmeshed in the logics of a given society.”⁶⁸ The artists are in a difficult position because their performance is between this paradox of performance and performativity. The performers are on one hand representing a dignified image of Afro-Ecuadorians. However, they are simultaneously confronted with the reality of structural environmental exploitation informed by the same racist framework that asserts that Afro-Ecuadorians are “like vultures.”⁶⁹ Part of this negotiation has to confront stereotypes:

[w]hile the very visibility of cultural performance has certainly opened political and economic possibilities for Afro-Ecuadorians, it also reinforces stereotypes of blacks, positioning them yet again in the one sphere in which they have long been accepted in the country: as musicians, dancers, and entertainers.⁷⁰

In this particular venue, the stereotype of the Afro-descendants as only good for music, dance, and entertainment feeds into another stereotype, which is prevalent in different environmentalist networks—that they, “are much more preoccupied with the day-to-day... The people are worried about things much more concrete... The issue of food; the issue of security,” than of the environment or anything else.⁷¹ Performers are particularly vulnerable to scrutiny because of the assumption that material needs are so great that making the time for dance and music (a low to no income endeavor) is an irresponsible waste of time. The real effects of these stereotypes are the historical exclusion of community groups from participation in processes that risk their health and livelihood, such as the construction of OCP or the state owned oil-refinery, because of their perceived inability to make ‘good’ decisions for themselves.

However, the artists themselves directly challenge these stereotypes—from their motivations to be professional artists to their responses to contemporary political issues at the event. In a conversation after the performance, one artist expressed frustration: “You don’t see the changes. They have left us without fish, without a means to go out and work. Esmeraldas should be the richest province. Look out how many resources there

are—mines, the oil refinery and, before, fishing. And where does the money go?”⁷² Another artist commented more directly on the pollution affecting the population of Esmeraldas: “The community is getting contaminated and no one reflects on this. They make like a screen, they organize donations as if they were gifts to people to divert their attention from the real problems of contamination.”⁷³

These comments suggest that artists are not ignorant to these problems, even as their performance is enmeshed in the center of them. The performance of marimba becomes a space not of ignorance and conformity to the actions of OCP, but instead a space where artists must negotiate broader aspirations to represent their identities with dignity and pride through performance while making a material living. Often the contexts in which dance is performed is problematic and unequal because of the ways in which broader society is problematic and unequal. But, as Edward Brunner suggests, perhaps the significance of performance is not to transform the audience so much as to transform the performers themselves.⁷⁴ From this perspective, the audience’s interpretations of the performance at the OCP hosted event may further perpetuate stereotypes. However, the performance is simultaneously a space for artists of African descent to assert themselves and their identity. This expression has the potential to create identity consciousness, a foundational step towards a broader social justice movement.

This event is just one example of what I call the politics of Afro-Ecuadorian culture in music and dance; it explains how various artists and activists work within the constraints of the reality of a low-income and environmentally exploited environment. A study of *Africa Negra’s* performance must take into account the multiple discourses and contexts that compose it. This contextualization creates a rich understanding of how the performance does not produce any singular meaning (that of boosting OCP’s image or of empowering artists); instead, the performance produces multiple meanings that are part of larger social movements, including the process of defining the Afro-Ecuadorian identity. Though some may interpret marimba performance as reinforcing stereotypes of blackness, it is also part of a broader struggle against a history of negative stereotyping and unequal distribution of resources alongside other movements, such as the struggle for

collective land rights. Because of this history, the performance of Afro-Ecuadorian dance and marimba is constantly at the forefront of contradictions, competing interests, and abstract tensions.

From the history of marimba to Sonia España’s experience becoming an Afro-Ecuadorian folklore singer to the performance of all the artists together at the OCP event, one begins to see that through music and dance, histories and ongoing narratives about Afro-descendant identities are constructed and maintained. The work that these artists do and the different ways they choose to express themselves through music will continue to have an impact in the way that ‘traditional Afro-Ecuadorian culture’ is imagined. This particular impact is difficult to quantify, particularly given the multiplicity of meanings at any given site of performance. Musicians, dancers, and spectators are part of the meaning making process. Afro-Ecuadorian artistic expression through the performance of dance and music is transformed based on the relationship of artists to their performance, the broader conditions in which they live, and the context in which they perform. The power to make meaning through dance and music is particularly contentious today because it is rooted in historical notions of ‘blackness’ and ‘otherness.’ The performance’s ultimate public definition is dependent on both the agency of the performer, as well as a larger web of social and political networks.

CONCLUSION

The thesis began situated between two ideas of marimba performance and representation of Afro-Ecuadorian identity: the first that marimba is a symbol of Afro-Ecuadorian resilience, especially in the land rights movement, and the latter that it is a token expression of multiculturalism. The most important message from both Fierro’s contextualization and García’s critiques are captured eloquently in the words of Grandfather (*Abuelo*) Zenon:

We cannot forget that our right to live in these territories is born in the historic reparation of the damage/harm that meant the dispersion of our African blood through America, dispersion that through the will of others we had to live these hundreds of years before the configuring of the States which now order/regulate us... what we are today does not depend solely on our will or

desire to be. Today we are what the laws of the State direct and dictate that we will be.⁷⁵

Zenon's statement is significant because it not only highlights Afro-Ecuadorians' position to the state territorially but makes a significant point that 'what we are' is in part dependent upon 'the State' as well as individual Afro-descendant actors. Furthermore, Zenon's statement strikes at the heart of the theoretical distinction between performance and performativity: the former punctuating individual agency and the latter emphasizing how performance is enmeshed in broader social and political contexts. With this distinction, it becomes apparent that marimba performances have multiple significances for many different people, from those performing to those watching.

The broad range of analytical tools presented include: the history of race and the emergence of plurinationalism, a more focused look at Afro-descendant historical presence in the region, intellectual history, and a series of analyses dedicated to understanding the contemporary construction of Afro-descendant identity in Esmeraldas around the marimba. These different analytical tools demonstrate firstly that plurinationalism does not necessarily exclude racial discrimination, and secondly, that representations of Afro-descendants in Ecuador are not only created in the realm of governmental politics but also through artistic expression. It is in the world of artistic expression that the mundane and the imaginative merge to create a marimba with multiple significances: an instrument, a genre of music, a form of work, a personal expression, a choreographed performance, or a popular representation of blackness.

In addition, the artists' various interpretations created around the practice of marimba demonstrate the ways in which these artists' lived experiences inform the representation of Afro-Ecuadorian identity in a plurinational framework. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that the politics of culture and performances are deeply intertwined, both in the past and in the present. I hope this article serves as an introduction to the critical discussion of marimba in Esmeraldas. More broadly, I hope this work can encompass a larger debate of how to critically engage active political thoughts that exist among artists to create narratives through performance—narratives that challenge historical representations of blackness

and that address the existence of racial stereotypes. Ultimately, the creation of these new narratives that confront history and imagine a future of respect from it carry forth the potential to transform individual, communal, and national ways of imagining difference and belonging.

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