

EMISFÉRICA

Interrogating Blackface in the Afro-Peruvian Revival

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In the 1950s to 1970s, a revival of Afro-Peruvian music and dance was staged in major theatrical venues in Lima, Peru. Before the revival, although black Peruvian Limeños lacked the social privileges associated with whiteness, they shared with white *criollos* a coastal musical culture identified with European origins. Seeking to fight racial discrimination and social invisibility, folklorists and community leaders re-created the forgotten songs and dances performed by Afro-Peruvians in the colonial era. Because only fragments of African-descended cultural practices remained in collective memory, revival artists often imagined new ways to perform a “black” identity that would celebrate their cultural heritage and separate them from white *criollos*.

Midway through my research for my book on the Afro-Peruvian revival (Feldman 2006), I (a white, North American ethnomusicologist) was astonished to learn that some early revival performances prominently featured the use of blackface. Why, if the goal of the Afro-Peruvian revival was to revalorize black culture, was blackface used? And why was there no public protest against the use of blackface? Grappling with these questions, I became acutely aware of the difference between my own and some of my consultants’ ideas about “race” as well as how certain aspects of the Peruvian racial imagination contributed to the re-creation of African musical heritage in Peru (see Radano and Bohlman 2001).

The first major revival performance, by the Pancho Fierro Company in 1956, was conceived and directed by white *criollo* folklorist and scholar, José Durand. In my interviews with former Pancho Fierro company members, no one mentioned the use of blackface. I stumbled across the evidence on a follow-up trip to Lima to review archival newspapers, when I found a 1950s photograph of the Pancho Fierro company, clearly showing singer Juan Criado’s smiling, corked face. From my interviews, I knew that many of the vocal solos in the Pancho Fierro shows were performed by Criado, a well-known performer of ambiguous ethnic heritage. Criado’s association with high society and his light skin placed him in the social milieu of white Peruvians, and the high proportion of solos he was granted in the Pancho Fierro shows was a point of contention between him and other cast members (Santa Cruz 1964). His use of blackface may have been a way of highlighting the difference between Criado and his more obviously Afro-Peruvian cast members—a “racial” difference in the process of being established and naturalized by the Afro-Peruvian revival.

When I asked several Afro-Peruvian consultants about Criado’s use of blackface, they chuckled at my surprise and then informed me that Peruvian poet César Calvo also

“painted himself black” when he performed with the Perú Negro company in the 1970s. Although he was not of African heritage, Peruvian poet César Calvo (1940–2000) was a major force behind the creation of the “black” identity that defined the folkloric music and dance company Perú Negro. In his role as narrator, Calvo typically wove together Afro-Peruvian folklore, West African-derived religions, and writings of *negritude* poets. Perhaps to highlight the “blackness” of these traditions (since he, himself, was not visually “black”), Calvo often wore blackface. After Calvo left the company, Perú Negro continued for many years to employ outsiders (usually white) to fill the narrator role he had created, a programmatic element that emphasizes the framing of the company members as their slave ancestors.

It seems, then, that the use of blackface in the revival was related to the establishment of racial difference within criollo culture, separating “real” Afro-Peruvians from the white (or at least whiter) individuals who also led the revival in its early days. What is less clear is where the idea of using blackface originated. Was it a vestige of the blackface theater traditions brought by the Spaniards to many American colonies? Was it related to the “negritos” dances performed by highland-dwelling indigenous Peruvians wearing black masks and mimicking imagined characteristics of Afro-Peruvians? Or was it a testimonial to the popularity of the American film *The Jazz Singer* and the globalization of U.S. minstrelsy via the silver screen? This is an area where further research is needed.

There has never been a widespread public movement against blackface as a form of racism in Peru. Perhaps this is because, unlike organized minstrelsy in the U.S., Peruvian uses of blackface typically have been more isolated occurrences (with the exception of indigenous *negritos* dances). For example, when a white actor in blackface played the lead in the 1988 Peruvian television miniseries *Matalaché*, based on a famous Peruvian novel set in times of slavery (López Albújar [1928] 1991), a letter to the editor of a Peruvian newspaper by Afro-Peruvian actor Rafael Santa Cruz (1988) noted the lack of public protest. Thus, perhaps it should not have been surprising that, when I discussed this topic with many Afro-Peruvian consultants in Peru, I encountered acceptance, and even amusement, regarding the idea of “blacking up” to perform Afro-Peruvian music. Yet, because Afro-Peruvian music was revived to celebrate racial difference, the role of blackface in this project opens several cans of worms with respect to the constructedness (or re-constructedness) of black racial identity.

As critics of North American minstrelsy point out, the spectacle of blackface may produce a particular structure of racial feeling long before it is publicly acknowledged as a racist act (Lhamon 1998; Lott 1993). Moreover, it is not just the mask that makes the minstrel show. Several enduring elements of revival-style Afro-Peruvian music and dance resemble aspects of minstrelsy: the white narrator; emphasis on childlike humor; oversexualized black bodies; prominent use of the jawbone as a musical instrument; emphasis on the “spectacle of vulgarity” (Lott 1993: 138); and explicit display of blackness and scenes from slavery for white audiences.

In fact, the most powerful critique of racial “masking” that I have seen from within the Afro-Peruvian community takes aim not at white performers in blackface but rather at the

minstrel-like position of black Peruvians who have performed for white tourists in the decades since the revival. In the 1990s, Peru's Teatro del Milenio (Theater of the Millennium) presented the original play *Karibú*. In one of the most powerful scenes, the musicians in a nightclub called Peña Negronegro (Peña Blackblack) have not shown up for work because they found better-paying employment elsewhere. The *maitre d'* hands two male waiters the traditional costumes of Afro-Peruvian dancers, including a short skirt and midriff top for the "female" partner. A satirical parody of the overdone racial stereotypes found in Lima's peña shows follows, with the dancers wearing frozen grins. According to Lucho Sandoval, Milenio's artistic director, "It came from the necessity to speak about the peña ... It occurred to me that we could work with a facial mask. . . . The black man had to wear a mask to satisfy the taste of the public. So we worked with the idea of masks that should be inanimate during the whole scene. That is to say, no matter what we do, we had to act as if we were wearing a facial mask [...]"¹ Sandoval reports that, although *Karibú* was well attended, its satire sparked little public discourse.

In Lima, where a movement for the political and social rights of Afro-Peruvians has only gained serious momentum in recent years (see <http://www.concytec.gob.pe/foroafroperuano/>), the racial difference re-constructed in the Afro-Peruvian revival is part of a larger cultural narrative about "blackness." Thus, although the use of blackface—and the socially constructed nature of "blackness"—should be analyzed in cultural context, the generally uncritical public acceptance of this aspect of the Afro-Peruvian revival is a revealing element of both the staged reconstruction of blackness and its real-life ramifications.

Endnotes

1 Personal communication with the author, 1 March 2000.

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