

“Little Dancing Indians”: Tradition and Utopian Listening in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

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Abstract

San Miguel de Allende, a city of 171,857 located in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico, most often appears in media outlets in laudatory publicity, advertising this urban space as perfect for voluntary “lifestyle” immigration and tourism both foreign and national. This article addresses the social tensions, fissures, and paradoxes that emerge from specific auralities of San Miguel’s temporary residents. Their romanticized reception of traditional Indigenous danza performances contrasts sharply with the perceived noise of hip-hop in the town’s historic center. As more and more residents hailing from outside San Miguel search for their own versions of “small town Mexico,” the racialized experiences of young sanmiguelenses are invisibilized in the overwhelmingly positive reception of Indigenous danzas. The championing of mestizaje as the sole visage for Mexican modernity leaves a convenient space for transnational racism located at the nexus of racialized economic privilege and colonial imagination. In this purportedly post-racial ideological context, how can the analysis of settler-colonizer aurality uncover the racialized structures that undergird the nation-state’s management of cultural tourism?

“The pealing bells proclaim their painful pronouncement of yet another fiesta and the night air becomes a cantata of dogs and a cacophony of bells. These are the times when the locals can dress up in drag, call themselves “Los Locos,” the crazies, and dance to their heart’s content. But the masks they wear must never reveal the face behind it, just as everyday life demands that the true soul be submerged to society’s standard. The crazies have just found a happier way of dealing with conformity. It is not uncommon to be sitting quietly in the Jardín one moment enjoying the crisp morning air, and in the next minute to be surrounded by hundreds of Indian dancers, their plumed costumes radiant in the brilliant sun.”

—From blog post “San Miguel: The Town That Parties Too Much,” Bill Begalke¹

At 9:45 p.m. on November 11, 2017, the Rockingz Crew hip-hop collective sat on top of stacked multicolored foam mats between the trees of the Jardín Principal and the statue of an Indigenous man being saved by Franciscan monk Fray Juan de San Miguel. Three groups of mariachis played simultaneously in the background. A group of middle-aged women danced in pairs to the mariachis. A b-boy sat atop the speaker wedged between the mats, and supporting members of the hip-hop community (rappers and graffiti artists from other neighborhood-based crews) surrounded the b-boys, as two cross-armed police officers and a representative of public works gazed over the scene. “We’ve asked for permission from the municipality for months, but some people don’t like this show. They just want little dancing Indians,” someone yelled. The representatives from the police and public works were unpopular figures at the moment. “¡Déjenlos bailar! ¡Déjenlos bailar!” (Let them dance! Let them dance!), the crowd seated on the benches started to chant.

¹ Bill Begalke, “San Miguel: The Town That Parties Too Much,” Mexconnect, January 1, 2002, <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/376-san-miguel-the-town-that-parties-too-much>.

One salty man was especially vociferous, yelling from his seated position that the police should be coherent: Why were the mariachis allowed to perform with no interference, when their songs all sounded the same? A white British man in his sixties with a ponytail started a conversation with me in English as I filmed the protest: What were the dancers doing? Why were they being asked to leave? Why were they guarding their things? After I gave him a perfunctory explanation, the man put two twenty peso notes in my hand and said, “Please make sure they get these.”

Introduction

In this opening anecdote, a member of a hip-hop collective forcefully asserts that the reason that the collective members are unable to perform in the center of their city is that “some people” do not like their show, preferring “inditos bailando.” Who are the “some people” to whom the collective member refers? To what end does this collective member use this pejorative term to refer to the dancers? In this article, I use an ethnographic approach to examine the social tensions, fissures, and paradoxes related to cultural performance of Indigeneity in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, a city in the state of Guanajuato that has thus far been the subject of little scholarly inquiry regarding music and sound—although there is a promising body of work engaging the roles of gentrification, lifestyle migration, and heritage formation. In the social context of San Miguel in 2017, the reception of the cultural performance of Indigenist *danzas* during festive days serves as a rich field of analysis for the tense relationship between those who consider themselves *sanmiguelenses* and those who *sanmiguelenses* refer to as “foreigners,” “tourists,” “Americans,” “North Americans,” “outsiders,” or simply “gringos.”² The presence of foreign residents and tourists in San Miguel has shaped the cultural and musical bounds of the city, as the economically privileged displace working-class *sanmiguelenses* from land as well as from public space.³

As the collective member suggests, the uplift of pre-Columbian history through dance and spectacle does not mitigate processes of displacement, elimination, and invisibilization of the “native” (in this case, I use Patrick Wolfe’s term in order to describe working-class *sanmiguelenses*, both Indigenous and *mestizo*).⁴ In this article I propose a broadening of Wolfe’s conceptualization of settler colonialism that engages contemporary workings of race in Latin America, a project that may lead us to new understandings of how interpretations of cultural performance enable settler colonialism. In the case of Mexico, the palimpsestic violence of Indigenous land

² The *danzas* in the context of San Miguel comprise the performance of neighborhood *mesas* (dance troupes) who perform a set of dances based on the translocal tradition of *azteca*, *chichimeca* or *apache*-style dances. These troupes are more easily distinguished by differences in their clothing and neighborhood affiliations announced on signs than they are by the sounds or movements.

³ Spanish is both a language with a violent colonial legacy, and a language historically marginalized within the US academy. To recognize this duality—which leads to a typographic challenge—I have italicized words in Spanish when they initially appear in the text. Subsequently, they appear upright. The only exceptions to this practice occur when disambiguating the Spanish use of the indigenous demonyms *apache* and *chichimeca*, which are not capitalized, from the capitalized English versions.

⁴ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409. *Mestizo* is a term used in Mexico to denote the racially mixed descendants of Indigenous and Spaniards.

seizure initiated by Spanish colonization continues into the present day context of neoliberal real estate markets and government-sponsored construction projects.⁵ Although not the main subject of this article, celebratory and nominal forms of recognition can perniciously obscure the very current land rights struggles particular to Indigenous populations. From 2010 until the time of this article, the Otomí of the Cruz del Palmar community have continued to resist the planned route of the Bicentenario highway, whose construction threatens to split the community's land in half, making one half inaccessible to the other.⁶ While the governor of Guanajuato asks for the Otomí to "sacrifice themselves" for the highway, the urban grid of San Miguel stretches further and further outward.⁷ The name "Otomí" is emblazoned upon the signs to the entrance of a luxury equestrian residential complex bearing the name of the people whose land it sits upon. In this present-day manifestation of colonialism, a real estate company's jovial blurb for a property adapts the narrative to its English-language reader's tastes: "What's your dream? Fulfill it with this lot in Otomí! . . . Ready! Set! Build! Let your dreams begin!"⁸

Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan describe how colonizers silence Indigenous "din"—I argue that in order for this din to be silenced in San Miguel, stakeholders in the powerful foreign community and tourist enterprise decide what indeed constitutes that which is "native" or "traditional," and draw a taxonomy from there as to which sounds are acceptable or not.⁹ I draw from Ana María Ochoa Gautier's assertion that the "relation between the ear, the voice, and the understanding of life" constitutes an important dimension of "what a 'local' expressive culture was supposed to be or become and who could incarnate it."¹⁰ I analyze how projections of Indigeneity and tradition onto cultural performance act as tools for implementation of sound regimes determined by settler colonizers. Interrogating the gaze and specific auralities of white US American spectators, I also look to primary

⁵ The lands that currently comprise the center of San Miguel de Allende, once known by the diverse Indigenous population living in the region as Izcuanipan, have been the site of colonization and contestation since the incorporation of the territory into the jurisdiction of the Justicia Mayor de Chichimecas y Provincia de Xilotepec by the Spanish Crown in 1542. San Miguel's colonial geography is set atop a small area of the territory designated by the Mexica as Chichimecatlalli (now known as the Bajío region) and was part of the territory roamed by the Pame, Guamare, and Guachichil peoples; the Otomí practiced agriculture and lived in the area. The Spanish adopted the Nahuatl term "Chichimeca" and adapted its meaning to connote what they considered the savagery and godlessness of the northern nomadic tribes. This linguistic colonization of terms is apparent in several varieties of Latin American Spanish, where the term *chuchumeca* is used to insult someone's intelligence, culture, or upbringing.

⁶ Antonio de Jesús Aguado, "Otomíes enfrentan 'La nueva conquista,'" *Atención San Miguel*, <http://www.atencionsanmiguel.org/2014/08/29/otomies-enfrentan-%E2%80%99Cla-nueva-conquista%E2%80%99D/>; and Antonio de Jesús Aguado, "Tema pantanoso es la autopista del bicentenario," *Atención San Miguel*, <http://www.atencionsanmiguel.org/2019/01/21/tema-pantanoso-es-la-autopista-del-bicentenario/>.

⁷ "Los otomíes deben sacrificarse por la autopista: Márquez," *Sopitas.com*, <https://www.sopitas.com/noticias/los-otomies-deben-sacrificarse-por-la-autopista-marquez/>.

⁸ San Miguel Real Estate Listings, <http://sanmiguelrealestatelistsings.com/properties/otomi-2/>.

⁹ Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan, *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, and Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 8.

¹⁰ Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 11.

source texts written by English-speaking immigrants to San Miguel to provide crucial insight into how this narrative literature (found online in blogs or in self-published books) articulates their understanding of what Mexico “should” sound like as a backdrop for their new lives abroad.

Laying out a conceptual framework for understanding projections of Indigeneity and “tradition” within a predominantly mestizo context, I present two linked case studies in which the settler-colonizer gaze uneasily coexists alongside sanmiguelense subjectivity. First, I present multivalent interpretations of *danzas* on festive days, where dancers engage in the syncretic practice of celebrating the founding of the town. As young sanmiguelenses vie to expand their identitary networks through hip-hop and a reimagination of the *cholo*, spectators engage in a process of white self-discovery.¹¹ Second, the racialized politics of cultural management in San Miguel emerge through discussions around the allowance of hip-hop in the touristic center. Each case study occurred in the months of October and November of 2017.

Prompted by J. Kēhaulani Kauanui’s imperative to not engage in a further elimination of the Indigenous, I attempt to navigate the in-betweenness left by the politics and errant historiography of *mestizaje* (racial mixing), allowing the declarations or identifications with Indigeneity to speak for themselves, without attributing either authenticity or a lack thereof to these claims.¹² By interrogating the temporary resident gaze during moments of cultural performance, we see that the urge to (re)place the “native” manifests in the way in which space is occupied, the racialized personhood of young sanmiguelenses made invisible while the sounds of spectacle take on acousmatic agency for the “raceless” spectator. Despite the contrasting geographies of race I have described above, the discussions writ large around race in San Miguel, and in Mexico, have often been limited by what Mónica Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar Tanaka call the “hegemonic character of *mestizaje* . . . its normalization force, the promise of inclusion it bears, its deeply rooted anti-black racism and the belief that Mexico’s deep social injustice is solely rooted in class stratification.”¹³ In a town, city, state, and region where claims to enduring Indigeneity are often relegated to cultural performance, what work can the notion of settler

¹¹ The term “cholo” in the context of US history dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, but the present-day usage of the term both in the United States and Mexico finds its roots in the *pachuco* figure of the early to mid-twentieth century. In the *Encyclopedia of Latino Culture*, Erik César Morales defines the dress style of the modern-day *cholo* as “largely an appropriation of the way Mexican migrant workers dressed when coming to work in the United States.” He goes on to define the style as “a plaid or flannel shirt with on the top buttoned or buttoned up to the neck, over a large white T-shirt or sleeveless shirt . . . loose-fitting khaki pants or shorts that extend beyond the knee to the upper or middle of the calf . . .” Erik César Morales, “Cholos and Cholas,” in *Encyclopedia of Latino Cultures: From Calaveras to Quinceañeras*, vol. 1, ed. Charles M. Tatum (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014), 338–42.

¹² J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, “‘A Structure, Not an Event’: Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity,” *Lateral: Journal of Cultural Studies*, Forum: Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities, 5, no. 1 (2016), <http://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-settler-colonialism-enduring-indigeneity-kauanui/#ts-fab-bio-below>.

¹³ Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar Tanaka, “We Are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans: Privilege, Nationalism and Post-Race Ideology in Mexico.” *Critical Sociology* 42, nos. 4–5 (2016): 515–33.

colonialism do to uncover the very racialized structures that operate in the guise of mestizo “racelessness”?

Located in the geographic center of Mexico, the state of Guanajuato relies heavily on tourism, both domestic and international, to propel its economy. Whereas the southernmost states of Mexico promote Indigenous heritage as part of their touristic offerings, Guanajuato is best known in the tourist circuit for its colonial cities: Guanajuato, the capital city of the state and home to the state university, and San Miguel de Allende, which was previously incorporated into the *pueblos mágicos* (magical towns) federal tourism plan.¹⁴ San Miguel de Allende (population 171,857, according to the intercensal survey of 2015) is situated in the highlands. Its economy relies heavily on tourism, and it is also home to an undetermined number of US American immigrants (estimates range between 5,000 and 15,000 “expats”) whose experience, according to sociologist Sheila Croucher, of “privileged belonging in a globalized world” stands in stark contrast to most other immigrant groups living in precarious economic, legal, and cultural situations.¹⁵ While maintaining residency in Mexico by continually renewing tourist visas, these mostly white US American residents enjoy a higher standard of living in San Miguel than they would in their places of origin, accessing affordable healthcare and deep senior discounts. As they buy property in the center of San Miguel, real estate prices have leapt, aided by the weak peso-to-dollar exchange rate (averaging roughly twenty to one, respectively, between the years of 2016 and 2018, when much of this research was completed). In the center of San Miguel in 2017, it was not uncommon to find homes being sold for millions of US dollars, with sales managed by foreign real estate firms Keller Williams and Sotheby’s. Similarly, some buildings in the center formerly used by a wide swath of San Miguel’s population are for sale and advertised only in English, converting the spaces into exclusive properties that have

¹⁴ SECTUR (Ministry of Tourism) initiated the “magical towns” funding program in 2001, and as of 2017, 121 towns were participating in the network of locations designated as “contributing to the appreciation of a group of towns in the country that have, together, always been part of the collective imaginary of the nation, and that represent fresh and different alternatives for national and foreign visitors.” Despite current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s threat in December 2018 threat to terminate special funding for pueblos mágicos, 2019 saw a continuation of the program. Secretaría de Turismo, “Programa Pueblos Mágicos,” SECTUR Website, www.gob.mx/sectur/acciones-y-programas/programa-pueblos-magicos.

¹⁵ Croucher proposes the concept of “privileged belonging” as a response to US Americans’ assertions that “They love us here!”—referring to the Mexicans working for them in service positions. See Sheila Croucher, *The Other Side of the Fence: American Migrants in Mexico* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2009), Kindle location 1918; Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL), “Informe anual sobre la situación de pobreza y rezago social 2016,” Secretaría de Desarrollo Social, 2016, http://diariooficial.gob.mx/SEDESOL/2016/Guanajuato_003.pdf.

The phenomenon of North-South migration to Mexico is not limited to San Miguel de Allende. Other large populations of US American immigrants are found in Monterrey, Lake Chapala, Mexico City, and San Cristóbal de las Casas. In other parts of Latin America, there are US American immigrant communities centered around retirement amenities in places as far-ranging as Panama and Cuenca, Ecuador. See Matthew Hayes, “Una nueva migración económica: el arbitraje geográfico de los jubilados estadounidenses hacia los países andinos,” in *Boletín del Sistema de Información sobre Migraciones Andinas* 15 (April 2013), 2–13; David Dixon, Julie Murray, and Julia Gelatt, “America’s Emigrants: US Retirement Migration to Mexico and Panama,” Migration Policy Institute and New Global Initiatives (June 2006), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/americas-emigrants-us-retirement-migration-mexico-and-panama>.

exponentially risen in price. Such is the case of the building housing the former Cine Los Aldama movie theater, which operated from the 1960s until 1996, when it shut its doors as workers participated in a strike for higher pay. During its years of operation, the theater held special weekly showings for people from the outlying communities. Sitting on a bench next to me in the central garden, Rosalba*, 48, recounted:

They would come in with their trucks every week. It was easy to park then, not like now. Now they park way far out or take the bus and walk in just to see the parades. It was nice, everybody would go to the movies and then walk around the garden. It wasn't like it is now, the center wasn't for this.

Despite a citizen initiative in 2015 to have the cinema building designated as part of the town's public patrimony, the municipal government never responded to a widely signed petition; the property was listed in March 2019 at \$2.9 million US dollars on self-proclaimed “ex-oil field executive” and “dual citizen” Ben Calderoni's real estate website.¹⁶

San Miguel de Allende participated in the pueblos mágicos tourism plan from 2002 to July 2008, when the town became incorporated into the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, a program whose mission is the “identification, preservation and protection” of “cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity.”¹⁷ In Lisa Pinley Covert's close historical examination of the politics of this transition, she notes the perceived financial benefits the UNESCO designation could offer for the touristic sector. Translated to the center of San Miguel de Allende, town officials have most recently interpreted the UNESCO mission as a mandate to enforce the appearance of a small town untouched by time, despite the competing claims for public services such as free and plentiful parking or a movie theater.¹⁸ No posters or printed publicity adorn the buildings surrounding the main garden that serves as the principal public plaza, located in front of the

* I have given pseudonyms to sanmiguelense collaborators who do not have a widely recognized public presence. For musicians who have a greater public presence online, I have used only the names they associate with their rap personas. Texts published by US American residents of San Miguel, which I use as primary sources, are fully cited. I have adopted this practice in response to sanmiguelenses' continually expressed concern of being *quemados* (“burned”), a deep and realistic fear of social, financial, or labor retribution as a consequence for expressing critical opinions about San Miguel.

¹⁶ Calderoni Properties, <http://www.calderoniproperties.com/property-1842-.php>; Jesús Aguado, “Proponen expropiar cine Los Aldama,” *Atención San Miguel*, <http://www.atencionsanmiguel.org/2015/02/13/proponen-expropiar-cine-los-aldama/>.

¹⁷ “World Heritage,” UNESCO Website, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/about/world-heritage>.

¹⁸ This attitude marks a transition towards the maintenance of the image of an unblemished colonial town, painted in jewel colors, a look adapted for the UNESCO application. Pinley Covert notes an older sanmiguelense's take:

“Another strategy to position San Miguel for UNESCO status involved repainting the buildings in the historic center. José Guadalupe Ramírez, who was born in the 1930s, recalled that during his childhood the buildings were pastel colors and not the bold ochre, salmon, and marigold hues that now dominate. During our conversation Ramírez took me out to the street and proudly gestured to his own house's crumbling, whitewashed walls. He claimed that local officials had been pressuring him to paint his house to conform to the predominant local aesthetic, but he refused to allow them. Ramírez insisted that his house was the only one on his street in the historic center that still reflected San Miguel's true historic appearance, while the other buildings reflected a generic aesthetic that appealed to outsiders.”

coral Parroquia (parish church). A select few vendors are permitted to hawk the flowered crowns, balloons, and hats that hordes of national tourists buy on their weekend excursions to San Miguel. Other than mariachi groups who flood the garden from Thursday to Sunday nights, public musical performance is controlled through a permit system until after 10 p.m., when *jipis* begin to unfurl their wares for sale atop batik tapestries, and b-boys emerge to hold their dance practice sessions.¹⁹

Youth from San Miguel and the surrounding communities struggle to gain access to sonic space in the town center, and they have come to consider hip-hop one of their few outlets. Through rapping, young people in San Miguel voice their experiences of their own town, a highly curated and desirable space dedicated to historical preservation and, increasingly, exclusivity. The material presented in this article, exploring the relationship of settler colonialism to race and Indigeneity in an extreme example of gentrification in a contemporary Latin American setting, relies heavily on the knowledge I gained as a collaborator in the Rockingz Crew hip-hop collective. This itinerant and loosely organized coalition of young sanmiguelense rappers and b-boys worked from September to December 2017 to regain their right to perform before the hours of 10 p.m. in the central garden. Interspersing descriptions of ethnographic encounters and using contemporary travelogues written by US Americans to juxtapose contrasting sensorial perspectives on San Miguel, my own positionality in the field as a cisgender white woman with roots in the US South who completed university and graduate studies in both Mexico and Spain shapes my observation and analysis. It is important to acknowledge the fundamental limitations of this reflection on what is perceived as “traditional,” *indio*, or “Indigenous” as it pertains to San Miguel; I build my knowledge atop the faulty episteme of Spanish, the language imposed over generations by fellow white (though Spanish) colonizing settlers. After fifteen prior years of academic and professional work with Mexican contacts both inside and outside the state of Guanajuato and Mexico City, I carried out my research in San Miguel over two years. During seven months of sustained fieldwork sandwiched between two shorter trips, I engaged with countless monolingual Spanish speakers (some of whom self-identified as having Chichimeca or Otomí roots but did not currently speak the respective languages of Chichimeca *eza’r/jonaz* or *Ñahñú*), very few monolingual English-speaking foreign residents (all of whom were white), and no speakers of languages Indigenous to the Bajío region. I recognize this irremediable knowledge gap as intrinsic to my positionality, for my language bases (as well as that of those

Lisa Pinley Covert, *San Miguel de Allende: Mexicans, Foreigners, and the Making of a World Heritage Site*, Kindle edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

¹⁹ *Jipis*, adapted from the borrowed word in English of “hippies,” is a term used broadly in Mexico to describe those between roughly twenty and forty years old who sell crafts on the street, whether sitting on a spread of cloth or in the massive street markets sometimes referred to simply as *los jipis*. There is no *jipi* street market in San Miguel, but there is a large seasonal *jipi* market in Guanajuato City. It is common in most cities or towns in Mexico to see *jipis* in what Kelley Tatro calls “bright, messy, artisanal clothing,” mixing traditionally crafted pieces with a street punk aesthetic of gauged ears and tattoos, dreadlocks (*rastas*), and dyed hair. For an in-depth analysis of a “counter-cultural” street market in Mexico City, see Kelley Tatro, “The Righteous and the Profane: Performing a Punk Solidarity in Mexico City” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2013).

collaborators whose voices populate this article) refract and reflect what Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to as the cognitive injustice of epistemicide.²⁰ Adding another, more recent layer to the problematics of colonialism and language, sanmiguelenses perceive US American residents of San Miguel as using predominantly English. Many friends recounted how the one or two US Americans they knew insisted that they learn English; these sanmiguelenses did not hesitate to express their discomfort with this practice, some calling it imperialist. Colonial language and nation are so thoroughly entangled that using the Spanish language in San Miguel was perceived as tantamount to a declaration of Mexican citizenship, and English, US American. Fluency in Indigenous languages in San Miguel rarely entered into the equation.

One day in November 2017, I sat in the flower-filled courtyard of a café in the historic center, observing foreign residents visit with each other, taking notes while I listened to them speak English. One man in his early fifties struck up conversation with me. I was open about my research, and I thought he had understood the premises of my project, until he asked me when I would start doing my fieldwork, going out “with the natives” and learning “their” language. This question revealed how popular understandings of anthropological inquiry map colonial terminologies across national boundaries. I clarified that I spoke Spanish and that the dynamics I was studying were playing out at that moment in the café where we sat. I told him that as we spoke, I was engaging in fieldwork, yet it was still unclear to him that the subject of study in that moment could be him. Furthermore, he assumed that ethnomusicological research implied knowledge of an Indigenous language; although he did not speak Spanish, he did not understand how I could be using Spanish as a research language. For the man, English trumped Spanish for intellectual pursuits, and Indigenous languages would be used in a utilitarian way to extract information.

In contrast, on another day in November, while riding in a car with a group of rappers through the town center, police pulled us over two times within a one-mile

²⁰ The overwhelming majority of sanmiguelenses, including those living in Indigenous communities, are monolingual Spanish speakers. One study found that the total percentage of inhabitants over five years of age in greater San Miguel who speak any Indigenous language is 0.24 percent, which is a higher figure than the overall average of 0.21 percent for the state of Guanajuato. However, Guanajuato has one of the smallest Indigenous language-speaking populations in the Mexican Republic. In 2019, Mixe linguist Yásnaya Aguilar denounced the “killing off” of Indigenous languages by the Mexican state, in a speech which she delivered in her first language of Ayuujk to the Mexican Congress. In the speech, Aguilar asserted that Indigenous languages do not “die off” but are rather sacrificed to the one fully state-sanctioned language of Spanish. This, Aguilar contended, is the true explanation for the decline in Indigenous language speakers to the current national average of 6.5 percent, down from 65 percent two hundred years ago. Almudena Barragán, “Yásnaya Aguilar: Las lenguas Indígenas no se mueren, las matan el Estado mexicano,” *El País*, https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2019/03/02/mexico/1551557234_502317.html; for a recent perspective on the transformative literature of the contemporary Indigenous insurgencies of Abiyala (the Americas writ large), see Hannah Burdette, *Revealing Rebellion in Abiyala: The Insurgent Politics of Contemporary Indigenous Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019); on current strategies to move beyond the cognitive empire in previously colonized contexts, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

radius. The second time, four police officers approached the car while the driver was in the process of parking and made everyone get out; I was taken to the side, onto a sidewalk in the shade, as they made the all-male group of my friends put their hands on the hood. I answered questions like everyone else did and was guarded by an officer whose hand never left their gun holster, as was everybody else. The scene shifted dramatically when, once the police had finished searching my friends and calling in their names to the station to check for prior records and had finished rifling through my backpack, looking through medications and asking me questions about my birth control pills, they asked for my identification. I had already responded to questions as to where I lived (in subsidized Infonavit housing on the outskirts of town), but when my US passport came into view, the officer who had been put in charge of me whistled to another officer, who was in the process of breaking the plastic interior liner of the window of the car, searching for drugs. He waved the passport at the other officer, and upon seeing it, the other officer quickly retreated from the car. There was no longer any problem—my passport not only signaled legal entry into the US but also allowed me to traverse into the center of San Miguel without fear of police harassment. The confusion for the officers had a twofold explanation: first, I had not claimed special rights as a US citizen during the encounter, because instead of feeling a sense of righteous outrage, as a woman, I was scared; second, I spoke Spanish when questioned, before any of us were asked to produce our identifications. These complicated social implications of language usage continually informed my perceptions, and perceptions of me, as I moved through the different spaces of my fieldwork. For the man at the café, I would have no reason to use Spanish, because I already spoke English and should have been learning an Indigenous language. For the police officers, sociolinguistic clues led them to believe that I was white sanmiguelense. In both cases, my whiteness afforded me special treatment: namely, the assumption of access and belonging and a lower probability of suffering direct physical violence from police.

The present-day politics of “belonging” in San Miguel are undergirded by a racist history of privilege and conquest. In his 2016 song “Los Mejores Sirvientes” (the best servants), Romba, a rapper originally from the rural community of Atotonilco, sarcastically compares current social conditions with the praise usually lavished upon San Miguel by foreign media. Laying claim to Otomí and Chichimeca Indigenous roots, the rapper warns that despite an apparent servility, the poor descendants of the violence of colonization are more aware of history than those in power. Making references to the “Otomí” equestrian/residential complex, the war on drugs, and the escalating violence in the city, the rapper makes audible the very modern social problems often silenced in the celebratory claims around the historicity of this urban space. The jewel-colored “colonial” aesthetic of the city serves as the backdrop for an uneasy reality of enduring colonialism, in an environment of massive wealth and social inequality.²¹

²¹ The CONEVAL “Informe Annual Sobre la Situación de Pobreza y Rezago Social” from 2012 demonstrated that in San Miguel de Allende, 44.5 percent of the total population lives in poverty, divided into 37.6 percent in moderate poverty and 6.9 percent in extreme poverty. Another 32.6

As Romba warns, the working class and poor of San Miguel “know who is who.” For sanmiguelenses, the social classification of sanmiguelense versus outsider is not based on race or nationality alone but rather on a set of sociolinguistic and ethnic factors that act as clues for identification, in which these categories play a large role. Race follows the contours of the geography of the municipality. It is not an overgeneralization to say that the temporary (tourists) or permanent (upper-class Mexican or foreign) residents of the historic center of the city are whiter than those living in the outlying neighborhoods. This racial contrast is even more noticeable when comparing residents of the center with those living in the twenty-seven outlying communities categorized as “Indigenous” by the INEGI government census, who make up a large portion of the service worker sector. Class- and genealogical-based categorizations allow sanmiguelenses to identify each other through economic, social, and political relationships that span decades or even centuries. Although some claim Indigenous heritage and others do not, there is a strong sentiment of class solidarity in the working class and pride attached to being “from” San Miguel. Prominent family names, quickly recognizable by working-class sanmiguelenses, occupy the upper echelon of the political class and also form the base of the creative class. The well-connected middle class occupies bureaucratic and administrative governmental positions. With the 1991 closure of the Aurora textile factory and its subsequent conversion into an arts complex, economic opportunities falling outside of tourism were greatly reduced for the working class. Historian Lisa Pinley Covert noted in 2017: “It is poignant and ironic that the working-class families that once exemplified an economic alternative to tourism now provide a festive backdrop for the industry.”²²

Although sanmiguelenses deftly categorize each other and outsiders based on social network, neighborhood affiliation, and genealogy, foreign residents often limit their appreciation of difference to within their own community. Many books have been written explaining how to live in San Miguel as an “expat,” where sanmiguelenses take on the role as faithful service workers, domestic employees, or as crowds in festive backdrop.²³ This process of othering sidesteps questions of Indigeneity as it simultaneously creates “the native,” an extension of the labor structure enacted through Spanish colonial racial classification of indio. The understanding of settler colonialism as a “structure, not event,” in which the elimination and replacement of the native is the active goal of settler society, became popularized by Patrick Wolfe’s “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” in the *Journal of Genocide Research* in 2006. Although Wolfe is innovative in his analysis of modes of elimination grounded in specific historical contexts, Shannon Speed (Chickasaw) points to how Wolfe’s work, including his 1998 book *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, may “undergird—at times a

percent live in vulnerable social conditions, and 4.9 percent are in vulnerable economic conditions. This totals 81.9 percent living in vulnerable or impoverished states. Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL), “Informe Annual Sobre la Situación de Pobreza y Rezago Social,” https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/31494/Guanajuato_1_.pdf.

²² Pinley Covert, *San Miguel de Allende*, Kindle location 3638.

²³ Authors often self-publish books giving tips and tricks on how to get by in their new countries of residence. They also offer cultural insights into the places they now call home.

bit too rigidly—our understandings of the workings of settler power.”²⁴ Wolfe’s binary of settler/native is especially difficult to apply to Latin American contexts because of the persistent national narrative of *mestizaje*, a narrative that discourages in-depth analysis of Latin America as a network of settler societies.²⁵ Thus, I argue that in a place where foreign and national tourists and residents, either temporary or long-term, wield a great deal of economic and cultural power, the discursive limits of settler colonialism must be expanded to include a broader definition of Wolfe’s term of “native.” A dark-skinned sanmiguelense may identify as *mestizo*, be referred to in a derogatory manner as *indio*, and be a monolingual Spanish speaker. The “native” confronting elimination through displacement in the context of present-day San Miguel may or may not identify as Indigenous; however, the processes of elimination do not bend to accommodate the exigencies and caveats of the Mexican nation state’s current emphasis on language as a defining factor in identity recognition.

The Camera’s Gaze: Parading through the Parade

October 1, 2017, 10:30 a.m. I stood with Rosalba on the side of the street, as Juan rested his weary legs by sitting on the curb. The *danzas* begin. There are many *concheros* groups from all over the republic, and more groups than I can count from San Miguel are portraying the battle of the Chichimecas versus the French.²⁶ Seeing the elaborately black and white painted bodies and the fierce grimaces of the members of one group hailing from a neighborhood situated in the exit from the city, Mónica commented, “Los del Valle del Maíz son los más bravos, es uno de los barrios más tradicionales” [The ones from Valle del Maíz are the fiercest, it’s one of the most traditional neighborhoods]. Along with the dances, floats constructed on truck beds depicted the civilizing of the savages. A white priest dressed in rough burlap administered communion, kneeling to dark-skinned women in white robes. Over and over again, I saw the trucks driving by with variations on this scene. Sometimes, the people to be converted were young girls. Always, they were women. As another dance group approached, a bare-legged blonde white woman in a flower crown walked confidently into the middle of the street, placing herself in the middle of the action with her camera zooming in at the end of her outstretched arms, close, too close, to the dancers’ faces. She turned and took a picture

²⁴ Shannon Speed, “Structures of Settler Capitalism in Abya Yala,” *American Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (December 2017): 783.

²⁵ M. Bianet Castellanos, “Introduction: Settler Colonialism in Latin America.” *American Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (December 2017): 780.

²⁶ *Concheros* refer to the dancers wearing seed shell cuffs around their ankles as they dance. *Chichimecas* does not refer to a specific ethnic group of indigenous peoples, but was rather a word adopted from Nahuatl by the Spanish to refer to wide swaths of hunter-gatherer and agriculturally oriented native societies. Although the Franco-Mexican war of 1861–67 is the broad theme of the dances between the Chichimecas and French, scholars have pointed to the evolution of the dance from being Chichimecas against Spanish conquerors to its current iteration of Chichimecas against the French. For an in-depth explanation of the evolution of the dance of the *Chichimecas y Franceses*, see Alejandro Martínez de la Rosa, David Charles Wright Carr, and Ivy Jacaranda Jasso Martínez, “Guerreros chichimecas: la reivindicación del indio salvaje en las danzas de Conquista,” *Relaciones* 145 (Winter 2016): 251–78.



Figure 1. A flower-crowned woman takes pictures during the patron saint danzas in San Miguel de Allende. Photograph by the author.

of a group of young men dressed in high-top sneakers, plaid shirts, baseball caps, and hoodies, who looked nonplussed at her attentions as they stood in front of the sign representing their neighborhood dance troupe. She then turned back and walked away in the direction she came, weaving her way through the dancers while Mexicans watched her, seated on the sidewalk.

The danzas are a collection of movement traditions performed in events celebrating Indigenous cultural heritage. In San Miguel de Allende, the annual festivities dedicated to the town’s patron saint bring together dance troupes from local neighborhoods, and from all over Mexico, during a two- to three-hour parade. As in most parade-style events in San Miguel, onlookers from poorer outlying communities arrive hours in advance to claim their spots, filling the buses that cost double for them or piling into family vehicles and attempting the difficult maneuver that is finding parking in the center of San Miguel. Many younger women and men from these communities participate as dancers in the parade. Although regional dances from all over Mexico are represented by visiting troupes, the most popular styles of local dance troupe attire and movements in this parade fall into three categories: *concheros*, known as Aztec-style dance; *chichimecas y franceses*, where the dancers representing Chichimeca dance in duel with the French; and the *danzas de apaches*, who borrow cues in attire from US popular media representations of Indigenous peoples.²⁷ The dance troupe categories are not without significant

²⁷ Mainstream Mexican historical views of the Apache people from the extreme north of Mexico mix here with stereotypical Hollywood movie depictions of “American Indians.” Hollywood movies

stylistic overlaps both visually and sonically. The *apache* or *chichimeca* dance troupes may wear the rattling shell ankle cuffs that the Aztec-styled troupes wear, or wear similarly styled black and white makeup. The *apache* troupe dancers are the most likely to wear tan fabric or suede tasseled skirts, moccasins embellished with beads, and large white, red, and black feathered headdresses.²⁸

From my spot on the sidelines, I hear fellow bystanders speak Spanish and point and wave at people they know, commenting to each other about how nice the dances are and how small and precocious the youngest participants are. Rosalba's comments to me about the Valle del Maíz being one of the most traditional neighborhoods interweave with her narrative about who is related to who, pointing to a man working for the municipality who is the brother of the woman who is married to her nephew. As one mesa (dance troupe) gives way to another, the 1-2-3-(rest) quadruple meter rhythm provides the prevailing rhythmic background. Dancers in unison leap to the right in a quarter turn, return to the center on the rest, and repeat the quarter turn to the left. Little sound is made by the dancers' feet, as they often do not wear shoes, but the sounds of the seed shell cuffs around their ankles shake like rattles. Anthropologist Sohnya Sierra Castorena has documented how the varying song forms and rhythms of danza azteca performance celebrate pan-Indigenous identity in translocal contexts.²⁹ However, some dancers do not consider the dances to be reflective of Indigeneity. One of the few women leading a dance troupe in San Miguel, Marta (twenty-nine years old) responds to my question about her *chichimeca* style dance troupe as a type of homage to Indigenous heritage in an interview over text: "Are you religious? It's more like that, expressing our faith, and our gratitude for the sun and the corn." She sends me a picture of her grandfather, who, along with her father, is one of her greatest inspirations for continuing the dance tradition. Seeing the old man in a straw hat and a plaid shirt, I reframe the question:

"Do you all consider yourselves Indigenous, or have any Indigenous descendance?"

"I don't think so. Not that I know of."

"How long has your family lived in [community name withheld]?"

"Forever!"

Marta's responses to my question and Rosalba's classification of barrios, colonias, and comunidades as either "traditional" or not reflect what sociologist Andrés Villarreal refers to as the very blurry line between mestizo and Indigenous identities in Mexico.³⁰ Flores and Telles, building on Villarreal's work, argue that many youth

began to be screened in Mexico City in the 1910s, much to the chagrin of Mexican cultural critics, who considered this a new form of "Yankee invasion." See Laura Isabel Serna, *Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

²⁸ Some performers of danza in the neighboring state of Jalisco have called the "Apache" style of dress "inauthentic" and regionally inappropriate, while linking it to youth culture. For example Martha Heredia Casanova, "Indumentaria tradicional de Jalisco," in *De Fiesta Por Jalisco*. (Guadalajara, Mexico: Secretaría de Jalisco, 2006), 30.

²⁹ Sohnya Sierra Castorena, *Remembering and Performing History, Tradition, and Identity: A Multi-Sensory Analysis of Danza Azteca* (PhD diss., Temple University, 2016).

³⁰ Andrés Villarreal, "Stratification by Skin Color in Contemporary Mexico." *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 5 (October 2010): 652–78.

who may identify as Indigenous in Mexico are “Western-attired, monolingual Spanish-speaking, and urban”; that is, they do not fulfill the stereotype of Indigeneity in Mexico and therefore may be underrepresented in the census.³¹ Yet, visually and aurally, in the dances performed by the troupes, there is a clear connection to stereotypical US media depictions of Native Americans. As the quote from the blogger in the beginning of this article demonstrates, foreign spectators may interpret these moments of cultural performance as “Indian” dances—and it is not rare to see young men dressed in Washington Redskins jerseys, or in troupes with names such as the Feathered Coyotes or simply Indian Dances with an indication of the neighborhood or community attached.

Shod in Nike rip-offs, many young men in the San Miguel groups play percussion on large bass drums, interspersed between the dancers, and wear attire associated with the cholos of East Los Angeles, a Mexican-American archetype especially prevalent in the 1990s. The adoption of verbal elements of English gleaned from African American hip-hop culture (using men, madafacka or ma niggas to address one another) mixes with a sartorial aesthetic of untucked large plaid shirts closed to all the way to the top button; slicked-back hair or more often, fades (pronounced feids); and oversized T-shirts, jerseys, or T-shirts with images of Biggie Smalls or Tupac. Authors have pointed to how cinematic representations of the Mexican American cholo in Hollywood movies such as *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993, also known as *Bound by Honor*), *Stand and Deliver* (1998), or *Havoc* (2005) have contributed to an abject, unidimensional image of young Mexican American men in the United States.³² The transnational effect of these films is clear from the fact that sanmiguelense youth often quote them. The creative reinterpretation of these stereotypes (a passive classification system in which white society looks on in horror at the purportedly violent tendencies of non-white youth) leads to the establishing of an archetype that young men can look up to, where the effects of the enduring transnationalism maintained between Mexico and the United States through migration are honored both through an identification with the East Los Angeles cholo and with African American youth in struggle. Still, it is precisely this aesthetic which is, for white US American and upper-class Mexican residents of San Miguel, a facile entry point for stereotyping and erasure. This look has also generated controversy among some dance practitioners, who consider it untraditional and unbecoming of troupe members to wear tennis shoes in the parades. Furthermore, when the young men who one day participate proudly in the parades while wearing these clothes walk up the same street using the same look on non-festival days, they may face police harassment or even arrest. Consider the following quote from Carlos, 21, who lives in a neighborhood near the southernmost edge of San Miguel:

³¹ René D. Flores and Edward Telles, “Social Stratification in Mexico: Disentangling Color, Ethnicity, and Class,” *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 3 (June 2012): 486–94.

³² Richard Mora, “Abjection and the Cinematic Cholo,” *Boyhood Studies* 5, no. 2 (September 2011): 124–37; Nicholas De Genova, “American Abjection: ‘Chicanos,’ Gangs, and Mexican/Migrant Transnationality in Chicago,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 141–74; Norman K. Denzin, “Selling Images of Inequality: Hollywood Cinema and the Reproduction of Racial and Gender Stereotypes,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities*, ed. Mary Romero and Eric Margolis (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005): 469–501.

So I'm walking up Hernández Macías and the cop pushes me against the wall and tells me he is going to search me because he doesn't like how I'm dressed. I told him I was coming from school. He told me if I didn't let him search me, he'd take me in the truck. I know then that means a beating, so I said, "Search me, but my mother works hard to buy me these clothes, I'm not working for anybody."

The interest that sanmiguelense youth demonstrated in an aesthetic mixture of cholo and hip-hop cultures, and in adopting terms from English, also signifies an outward reach toward the global in a time when their possibilities for social, economic, and physical mobility have been significantly diminished. In 2017, the way in which poorer sanmiguelense youth established and maintained affective ties with the United States differed from generations of youth past; this was a relationship based mainly on the consumption of open source (YouTube), mainstream (television or movies seen in the theater), or pirated media, as well as tales told to them by older family members who had spent time working in *el gabacho* (the United States), either in the past or currently. There has been a decrease in rural Mexican youth crossing the border, as the last three decades witnessed a worsening climate for immigrants in the United States as well as a faltering demand for labor.³³ Echoes of a national security crisis also found their way into the decision making process of sanmiguelenses who would otherwise follow in the footsteps of their older family members over the border, worried by the increased danger associated with crossing the border as the Zetas crime syndicate secured control over popular points of entry. News of kidnappings orchestrated between *coyotes* (professional border crossers) and organized crime circulated amongst members of the rural communities working in the center in the service industry. Of the nearly three dozen sanmiguelense youth in the hip-hop scene I came to know during fieldwork, only one had spent time working in the United States, although all of them had family who either had worked north of the border or who were currently working north of the border. The economics of crossing no longer made sense, they reckoned—the refrain I heard countless times was knowledge the youth had gained secondhand through their relatives' experiences: "You earn in dollars, but you also spend in dollars."

Race and Racelessness in Mexico

Race as a political and social concept in Mexico has undergone significant shifts from the colonial period (1521–1810) through today. Historians and archaeologists have shown that Spanish colonizers wielded considerable power in determining how visual representations depicted the Indigenous in their reports to the Crown, even going as far as adding piercings to *chichimecas* in artistic depictions and possibly for real-life displays in the king's court.³⁴ In the scientific caste system of colonial Mexico, the racial mixing of Indigenous with Spanish was considered to produce "bastards," the Indigenous blood constituting a stain within the genetic

³³ Héctor D. Hernández Flores, "¿Y los que ya no se van? Cambio e imposibilidad de trayectorias migratorias de jóvenes rurales en el centro de México," in *Jóvenes y Migraciones*, ed. Norma Baca Tavira, Andrea Bautista León, and Ariel Mojica Madrigal (Barcelona, Spain: Editorial Gedisa, 2014), 163–93.

³⁴ Martínez de la Rosa, Wright Carr, and Jasso Martínez, "Guerreros chichimecas."



Figure 2. A neighborhood dance troupe includes drummers dressed in sports jerseys and Nikes. Photograph by the author.

makeup of the otherwise pure Spanish citizen. By the eighteenth century, such was the obsession with racialization that the genre of caste paintings was born. These paintings, far from a true taxonomy of racial mixture, worked as didactic tools to understand how people should be seen racially according to their genealogies, which would imbue them with more or less moral, physical, or intellectual character. For instance, an Indigenous man mixed with an African woman produced a *lobo*, a “wolf”.³⁵ In the nineteenth century, classifications based on eugenics held up the mix of the physicality of the Indigenous and the intellect of the *criollo* (American-born Spanish) as the emblem of the new Latin American nations. Left with questions of unification after the 1910–1920 Revolution, Mexican intellectual elites conceived of modernity as a casting off of the nation’s Indigenous past through the mixing of the races into a single race, the *mestizo* (who is characterized by both their racelessness and their mix). Philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos conceived of the *mestizo* as the precursor to the *raza cósmica*, a hybrid race which challenged US views of the dangers of miscegenation.³⁶ Representations of the *mestizo* in popular Mexican media have often positioned the raceless modern Mexican against the racialized Afrodescendant. In the case of Mexican cinema, the racial knowledge created and disseminated through this media positions blackness as

³⁵ Natalia Caldas, “Casta Painting and the Characterization of Colonial Mexican Identities” (Master’s thesis, University of Western Ontario, 2014).

³⁶ Peter Wade, *Degrees of Mixture, Degrees of Freedom: Genomics, Multiculturalism, and Race in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

foreign, lascivious, and criminally oriented.³⁷ This has left a significant discursive gap between how racism is experienced in Mexico and how it is perceived as a problem only affecting those who openly and exclusively identify as Indigenous—that is, 21.5 percent of the overall population.³⁸ Sociologist Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa identifies the transnational quality of this paradox as she sees it expressed by her study participants: “Overall, racism in Mexico has been usually understood as acts of exclusion and discrimination that ‘somehow’ happen mainly to the Indígena communities and mostly to ‘black’ people abroad (‘in the US’).”³⁹ She goes on to present case studies in which mestizo respondents recount pointedly racist experiences, including an inability to get into clubs because of their skin color, all within the purported regime of racelessness that mestizaje promises. Still, as the INEGI census data described above suggests, Indigeneity does indeed persist in Mexico, despite both linguistic and territorial displacement.

In the celebration of Indigeneity on the second day of the parade dedicated to Fray Juan de San Miguel, it is impossible to ignore the paradoxical relationship of tokenization to exclusion. As the young men of the neighborhoods and communities of San Miguel walk uphill on the street Zacateros on their circuitous path to the Parroquia, the nineteenth century church that serves as the centerpiece for the city’s touristic offerings, the contradictions between their treatment on festive days and regular days could not be more evident. Holding signage announcing their neighborhoods, beating the drums for the dancers, or simply shuffling along with the crowd, the young men enjoy a level of protection within the parades that they do not experience in the everyday. On multiple occasions, young men recounted to me their interactions with the police when walking up the same street, where the police openly admitted that their clothing choices were the basis for them stopping, frisking, detaining, and even beating them.

This reality is woefully hidden from those who romanticize the sights and sounds of the *danzas*. The power of spectacle and perceived difference results in a beguiling erasure that falls short of engagement with *sanmiguelenses* as such. In the example of the woman wandering through the parade, her attention to her picture-taking precluded her awareness of her surroundings; to her, the people dancing were the “festive backdrop” to which Pinley Covert refers when describing the labor history of San Miguel’s working class. The most likely benevolent intentions of this enthusiastic photographer cannot account for, or mitigate, the physical displacement of

³⁷ David García discusses the othering of *danzón* through film depictions of Cuban musicians, where the genre is imbued with foreignness and immorality vis-à-vis the musicians’ associations with blackness. This is seen in classic films *Salón México* and *Víctimas del Pecado*. However, *danzón* had already developed into a Mexican style of music, similarly to the current surge in Mexican rap nacional (Mexican rap). See David García, “The Afro-Cuban Soundscape of Mexico City: Authenticating Spaces of Violence and Immorality in *Salón México* and *Víctimas del Pecado*,” in *Screening Songs in Hispanic and Lusophone Cinema*, ed. Lisa Shaw and Rob Stone (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2012), 167–88.

³⁸ Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), “Estadísticas a propósito del día internacional de los pueblos indígenas,” INEGI website, August 5, 2016, http://www.inegi.org.mx/saladeprensa/aproposito/2016/indigenas2016_0.pdf.

³⁹ Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa, “Distributed intensities: Whiteness, mestizaje and the logics of Mexican racism,” *Ethnicities* 10, no. 3 (September 2010): 387–401.

the dancers and musicians in real time as she commits their image to her visual memory, in her camera.

English language blogs celebrating the *danzas* relay much information about the specific aurality of the romanticizer, attuned to the sounds of difference yet somehow not fully present alongside the dancers themselves. In this excerpt, from a blog called “Nomad Women Travel,” a woman who is a US American resident of San Miguel describes how the sounds of *danzas* lifted her from her depression as she walked to the town center and settled in on a bench in the Jardín Principal (emphasis in bold my own):

Lost in my thoughts, I **saw but did not register the young woman** dressed in the standard *conchero* costume of neon lamé and huge red and green feathers on her head as she passed me going down the hill in the sun. The pounding of the *concheros* drumming vibrated up through my sandals. The first thing to get past my funk was the vibrations. The thrumming rhythm of drums had penetrated the paving stones, crept down the hill and wriggled straight up through the soles of my sandals. Had I been paying more attention, I would have heard them before I felt them; their pounding was strong, deep, relentless. . . . Here in San Miguel, a **magical colonial pueblo** perched on the high plain of central Mexico, it is also called the day of the *Concheros*, dancers named for the “*conchas*”—shell-like seed pods—wrapped around their ankles to rattle as they dance, spin and stomp, jump and leap, mimicking the Aztec dancers of Mexico’s glorious past. A robust mix of pagan and Catholic, this show of their devotion is a highlight of the year. Every year on this day, they fill the Jardín with their fervor, color, movement. And sound. Lots of sound. . . . I emerged from the narrow street into the wide space in front of La Parroquia church. Its pink cantera stone spires glowed and shimmered in the spring sunshine, that elusive light that draws so many artists to San Miguel. A wave of sound—no, make that noise—almost knocked me over as the pounding of the *concheros’* drums rolled over me. I felt assaulted by sound, color, movement. Settling onto a wrought-iron bench beneath the trimmed laurel trees, I let the exuberance take me.⁴⁰

The woman’s description of her experience awards significant agency to sound and vibration, the reverberations of the *danzas*, and to the erotic energy that these provide. She also is admittedly distracted when it comes to visually registering the dance participants. Their bodies do not easily enter into her consciousness. She cannot see them. The only human figures who receive specificity in their description are a tuba player, who she describes as being “at least 70 years old,” and the young boy accompanying him, who may be his grandson. She is, however, able to provide quite a bit more detail regarding the communications of the sounds of the birds seated above her in the trees of the Jardín:

From the southwest, clouds of black, boat-tailed grackles rolled into the square to settle into the branches of the laurel trees where they roosted for the night. It always took them a while to settle in as they **discussed their day, squabbling over favorite perches perhaps or crowing over fattest-worm bragging rights**. Their raucous cawing rained down like sharp pebbles onto the paving stones.

The timidity with which the writer approaches the description of people is lost when ascribing intentions to the birds. Even in this humorous tongue-in-cheek gesture, it

⁴⁰ “Remembering Joy in San Miguel de Allende,” *Nomad Women: Because Experienced Women Travel*, n.d., <http://www.nomadwomen.com/2015/06/01/joy-of-concheros-dancers-san-miguel-de-allende/>.

seems the participation of the sanmiguelenses who walk along the parade circuits, play percussion, dance, or are there as co-spectators, is limited in the narrator's sonic experience; they are there to produce their ecstatic noise, which will deliver her from her depression.

Sound, Tradition, and Desperately Seeking Mexico

No tengas miedo de los insurgentes, tenle miedo a los sirvientes, un indígena te sirve la comida, un indígena te sirve la bebida en la fiesta más importante de tu compañía, la fusión de las familias, comida envenenada piensa bien o te lleva la chingada, toda la ciudad se está prendiendo, al cerrar los ojos no evitas que sigamos creciendo. No hablo del mal ni del bien en este pueblo sabemos quién es quién.

Don't be afraid of the insurgents, be afraid of the servants, an Indigenous person serves your meals, an Indigenous person serves your drinks in the most important party of your company, the fusion of families, poisoned food, think hard or you're fucked, the whole city is lighting up, just because you close your eyes doesn't mean we aren't growing. I'm not talking about evil or good, but in this town we know who is who.

—“Los Mejores Sirvientes,” (“The Best Servants”), MC Romba, 2016.⁴¹

The pointed critique offered by the rapper in this song contrasts with the benevolent intentions of many of the foreign residents of San Miguel. Certainly, the knowledge displayed both in the song and in the Rockingz Crew collective member's wry comment about “little dancing Indians” could serve to inform the foreign population's perceptions of San Miguel; however, the language barrier precludes arriving at new understandings. This communication gap is part and parcel of the very living, breathing system of coloniality wrapped up in the management of culture in San Miguel. The power dynamics of this management are heavily weighted towards the cultural interests of the thousands of residents living in San Miguel who do not speak Spanish, opening up an even greater rift and leading to rising tensions between the sanmiguelense working class and temporary or permanent foreign residents. In this formula, the gringo may attempt to listen but is limited by their own racialized aurality in which sounds are vehicles for an epistemological weight that at first may be difficult to unpack. Returning to the man from the café who had asked me about my fieldwork, wondering when I would mingle with the “natives”: during our conversation, I told him about the weekly meetings with the hip-hop collective, and he shared his opinion with me on the debate regarding hip-hop in the center:

Up until one or two years ago, they would do hip-hop in the center. Then I think a lot of people started to complain. You know, we gringos. They put the music too loud and they weren't very good. So nobody wants to hear that, because it's not traditional. I mean I don't want to hear and see something here that I could see in downtown Baltimore. So I think they can't get permits anymore, and I think that's a good thing.

This man was from New York City, living in San Miguel several months a year, and felt comfortable during a casual conversation with a stranger about weighing in on the appropriateness of the sanmiguelense youth's practice of breakdancing and rapping in the city center. He went on to explain that this policy of cracking down on

⁴¹ Romba, “Los Mejores Sirvientes,” YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eo9yD7PYLvq>.



Figure 3. The Rockingz Crew dancers perform in the Jardín Principal in November 2017 before being removed by police. Photograph by the author.

hip-hop is something that every major touristic city probably does to protect tourism. Who would want to see *that*, he asked, rhetorically.

This white male interlocutor expresses the racialized, placed associations of hip-hop that have deep roots in the institution of US racism. For him, the cultural products associated with blackness must not be in dialogue with his interpretation of what is truly “traditional” in San Miguel. Black Baltimore becomes the inferior cousin of cosmopolitan New York; it is also a site of racial unrest, where the protests against police brutality in the death of twenty-five-year-old Freddie Gray had taken place in April 2015. The interlocutor also positions himself as aesthetic judge, an expert who can attest to the skill level of musicians working within a genre of music that he wishes to have prohibited from the city center through bureaucratic processes of permit denials. Finally, his questions regarding the availability of an audience for hip-hop performance in the center lay bare the ontologically racialized nature of the designation of “who.” By determining that which is *traditional* against that which is not based on his concept of Mexico as utopia, the interlocutor’s “who” in question must be white, moneyed, and must, most importantly, *be*. In Wolfe’s notion of settler colonialism, the native’s very *being* is endangered by the arrival of the settler colonizer. Few, if any, US Americans living in San Miguel would even tepidly endorse the extermination of sanmiguelenses; however, they feel obligated to protect the utopia to which they have become accustomed.

What are the features of this utopia? In Rich Benjamin’s 2009 ethnography *Searching for Whitoopia: An Improbable Journey to the Heart of White America*, the author discusses “Whitoopia” as places to which white Americans have flocked where they describe having found values similar to their own: “friendliness,

orderliness, hospitability, cleanliness, safety, and comfort.”⁴² In the same study, residents of these middle American exurbs recoil at the suggestion that these values align to any kind of racialized worldview, rather engaging geographically with the idea of “opportunity,” in a practice Benjamin calls “opportunity-mapping.” These migrants based their decision to move on “housing, education, medical facilities, crime rates, perceived sense of safety, outdoor amenities, and social comfort (simpatico values),” and most profess a “raceless” worldview. One African American resident of San Miguel, being interviewed by John Scherber, reported moving to Mexico specifically to avoid the black-white color line of the United States. The interlocutor, whose name is given as Cynthia, explains that in her perspective, “there is no race issue with Mexicans. How can there be an issue with color in Mexico? It’s just what your lineage is.” Availing herself of a musical metaphor, she continues, “. . .the Indian rhythm is what is the pace of this country, not European. It’s not that race may not be an issue with some of the white people who have settled here, but it’s not an issue with Mexico.”⁴³ This optimistic take on Mexican race relations is heavily influenced by the racial dichotomy of the United States, where black/white is seen as the principal racialized relationship. If the interlocutor perceives no tension directed towards her, then there is no race problem.

American studies scholar Rebecca M. Schreiber’s work on African American author Willard Motley’s writings provide important insight into the phenomenon of transnational racism south of the Mexico–US border. Motley’s fictionalized writings on the racism he observed in white American tourists in the late 1950s and ’60s were significantly altered or outright rejected by his editors at Random House. However, Schreiber provides an illuminating description of Motley’s unpublished manuscript “My House is Your House,” where “American tourists are presented as working in conjunction with other forces, such as the Mexican elite, the Catholic Church and the Mexican government, to exploit the poorest segments of Mexican society.”⁴⁴ Schreiber argues that Motley’s specific positionality as African American in Mexico allows him to access views of the society that Beat writers Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs were not privy to, bound by their own white privilege.

Conclusion: (Re)placing the Indio

Although US Americans arrive in San Miguel with heavy racial baggage formed in the dichotomous framework of black and white America, the desire to police and determine that which is considered traditional or “Indigenous” music or appropriate cultural expression is entirely aligned with the politics of modernity in Mexico.

⁴² Rich Benjamin, *Searching for Whitopia: An Improbable Journey to the Heart of White America* (New York: Hyperion, 2009), Kindle location 135.

⁴³ John Scherber, *San Miguel de Allende: A Place in the Heart. Expatriates Find Themselves in Mexico* (Laredo, TX: San Miguel de Allende Books, 2011), Kindle location 2181.

⁴⁴ Rebecca M. Schreiber, “Resort to Exile: Willard Motley’s Writings on Postwar U.S. Tourism in Mexico,” in *Adventures Into Mexico: American Tourism beyond the Border*, ed. Nicholas Dagen Bloom, 35–57 (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), Kindle location 817.

The championing of mestizaje as the sole visage for Mexican modernity leaves a convenient space for transnational racism located at the nexus of racialized economic privilege and imagination. Shannon Speed writes that the uncritical acceptance of the completeness of mestizaje “is to drink the Kool-Aid of nation-state hegemonic ideologies.”⁴⁵ Arguing for a more nuanced and complete analysis of the colonial-settler system in Latin America, Speed continues: “When we look at the countries throughout the Americas, what we see instead is a fair bit of similarity in the racialization of Indigenous peoples as uncivilized and savage, unfit for modern life and thus doomed to fade into extinction. (Corresponding gender tropes of Indigenous women as subordinate and inherently subject to settler violation are equally present throughout the hemisphere.)”⁴⁶

The case studies I have presented above are at first most noteworthy for their ostentatious display of privilege and erasure. However, the workings of these transnational encounters between twenty-first-century settler colonizers and sanmiguelenses rely on an extant system of colonialism in which those racialized as Indigenous live on the outskirts, have lost land, and have, despite this, survived. In transnational contexts where both the settler colonizer and the host society engage in a discourse of “racelessness” while lifting up the values of tradition and indigeneity, policies of cultural management can be enforced in profoundly racist ways. In Wolfe’s framework, settler colonialism destroys to replace. In San Miguel, the very act of defining the Indigenous constitutes a triaging process of destruction. The demands of the settler colonizer gaze crave non-threatening difference so as to affirm their un-racial or racially normative subjectivity; it is traditional enough when community dance troupes present their Indigeneity, but it is not traditional enough when the members of these dance groups venture outside the bounds of the drum to explore the multifarious expressions of hip-hop.⁴⁷ We may deepen Wolfe’s notion of invasion as structure, not event, by examining the ways in which the reception and interpretation of cultural performance (also understood as structure, not only a series of disparate events) fortify the project of settler colonialism through erasure, romanticization, control, and displacement.

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⁴⁵ Speed, “Structures,” 786.

⁴⁶ Speed, “Structures,” 787.

⁴⁷ In its extreme, the perception of threat emanating from the racialized sounds of rap has been blamed for acts of lethal violence against African American youth. In 2012, seventeen-year-old Jordan Davis was killed by Michael Dunn, a forty-seven-year-old white man who became incensed at the sounds of what he allegedly characterized as “thug music” before firing a handgun into the car where the teenager sat. Dunn claimed that he believed the teenager had a gun.

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