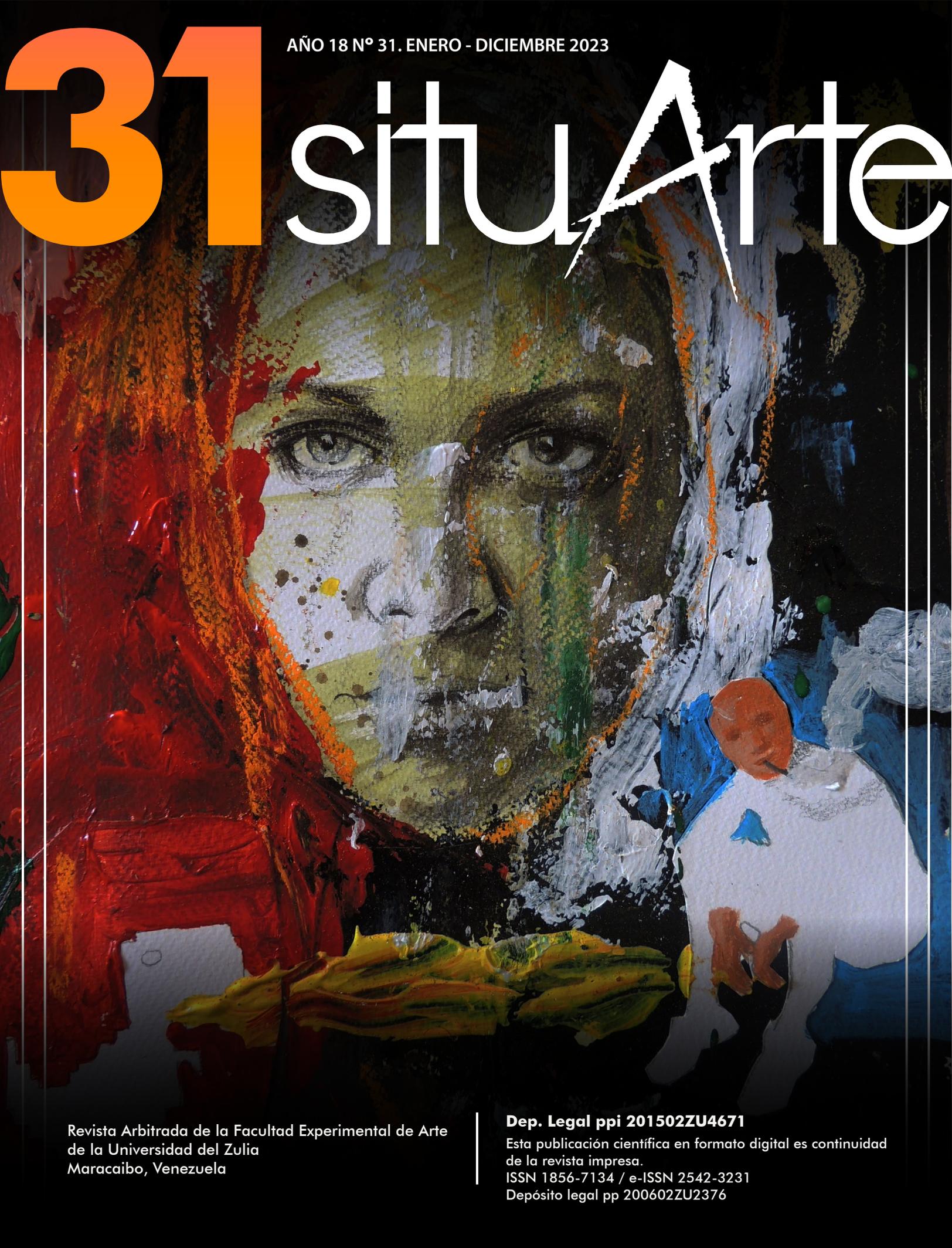


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# ***The Villancico de Negrilla: Europe and Africa in Seventeenth-Century Mexico***

## *El villancico de negrilla: Europa y África en el México del siglo XVII*

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### **Abstract**

Villancicos became an important musical genre in the Spanish world and migrated with the conquest from the Iberian Peninsula to the New World. Within the context of highly racially mixed societies in the Americas, the genre gained linguistic, thematic, and musical diversity. This paper examines issues of social agency in the musical depiction of African slaves through two compositions by Gaspar Fernandes and Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla. The author provides an analysis of texts through the lens of social agency to show the European view of the African subject in seventeenth-century Mexico. The study shows the varying portrayals of the African subject in the villancico genre by novo-Spanish composers of the time.

**Keywords:** Villancico, Negrilla, African Diaspora, Slavery, Colonialism.

### **Resumen**

El villancico se convirtió en un género musical importante en el mundo español y emigró con la conquista desde la Península Ibérica al Nuevo Mundo. En el contexto de sociedades racialmente muy mezcladas en las Américas, el género ganó diversidad lingüística, temática y musical. Este artículo examina cuestiones de agencia social en la representación musical de los esclavos africanos a través de dos composiciones de Gaspar Fernandes y Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla. El autor proporciona un análisis de textos a través del lente de la agencia social para mostrar la visión europea del sujeto africano en el México del siglo XVII. El estudio muestra las diversas representaciones del sujeto africano en el género villancico por parte de los compositores novo-españoles de la época.

**Palabras clave:** Villancico, negrilla, diáspora africana, esclavitud, colonialismo.

## Introduction

Following the Spanish arrival in the new world, viceroyalties like that of New Spain would become a melting pot of cultures. Early on during the conquest, the Spanish crown had divided the newly discovered territories into various administrative regions, amongst them were the viceroyalty of Peru in the Andes and New Spain, which occupies what is modern Mexico. Both of these were two of the richest in the colonies. Unsurprisingly, the novo-Spanish territory would see a steady increase in arts and literature output in the early years of the conquest. This paper looks at the European depiction of African slaves in two villancicos by Gaspar Fernandes (1570-1629) and Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla (1590-1664).

During the second half of the 16th century, the conquistadores' dominant class brought a plethora of cultural traditions and a new language to an already culturally diverse and language-rich territory. Amongst the many languages spoken at the time in Mexico, some of them still survive, were Nahuatl, Yucatec, Zapotec, Otomi, and others (Lastra, 1992). Through a process of evangelization, and acculturation in general, the indigenous peoples of these territories would eventually also learn Castilian Spanish and forcibly adopt the religion and costumes of the conquistadors.

The conquest of New Spain brought with it the demise of many of the peoples who inhabited this territory. It is estimated that by the beginning of the conquest, in 1519, approximately 25 million indigenous people inhabited Mexico. This number plummeted to 6 million in 1548, and a further 1.5 million by 1600 (Richmond, 2001). This rapid demise was caused amongst other things by slavery and diseases brought from Europe.

To add to this ethnically rich society, from the early days of the conquest, the Spanish colonizers brought with them African slaves. The vast majority of them were brought into New Spain via the Caribbean island of Cuba, a colonial hub for slave trading in the Spanish world.

In addition, the Spanish crown also tapped into the slave trade routes opened by the Portuguese crown. The decline of the indigenous population accelerated the need for labor in today's Mexico. Data of the time points to approximately 60,000 African slaves arriving in Mexico during the 16th century, as noted by chronicler Lopez de Velasco. Most African slaves were brought into the territory to work in the mining industries. In addition, the sugar boom during this period also increased the need for slaves in countries like Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. African slaves, however, were brought to the new world with various intentions, they were expected to serve in almost every aspect of life. They were involved in households, plantations, and many other aspects of daily life including that of musicians.

## The villancico in the Americas

Just like the indigenous populations of Mexico and the newly arrived conquistadors, the incoming peoples from Africa brought with them their cultural heritage and language. They were also subject to evangelization efforts and expected to convert to Christianity and master Castilian Spanish. It is within this context of a highly racially mixed society that hybrid cultural forms began to appear.

The imposition and dominance of Spanish Castilian as a language came alongside other cultural forms being brought in by the European colonizers. Musical forms and dances from Spain made their way into the newly colonized society. Some of these however would morph in order to fit the new society and reflect the new ethnic composition of the territory<sup>1</sup>.

One such case is that of the villancico, a literary and musical form brought from Spain. The term villancico has suffered various changes over the history of Spanish culture. It was first applied in the late 15th century to a vernacular poetic form. The form remains a simple one to this day, several stanzas (coplas) frame by a refrain (estribillo). The number of stanzas can be variable, and they are generally framed by the refrain. Villancicos in Spain during the 15th century were often associated with mundane rustic or popular themes in secular music. Composers of the time such as Juan del Encina (1468-1529) created a strong corpus of this type of music preserved in the Cancionero de Palacio. Thus, it remained a popular form of music in the 15th and early 16th century. Royalty and common folk alike had developed a taste for villancicos during the Spanish Renaissance.

The second half of the 16th century would see the villancico incorporate devotional and religious themes. The genre would gain popularity as part of religious ceremonies. These compositions, in the vernacular language, would be introduced following the liturgy on special feasts and dates of the Christian calendar. By the 17th century, villancicos had become more important than the Latin motet in the Hispanic world. While it would see a rapid decline in stylistic composition and general output in the 18th and 19th centuries, villancicos remind popular as the term now denotes 'Christmas Carol' in the Hispanic world, particularly so in Latin America.

Villancico writing in Latin America was at its height in the 16th and 17th centuries. The great cathedrals of the Spanish new world would go to great lengths to have villancicos composed for special occasions. This was the case of cathedrals such as Santiago de Cuba which would carry this tradition well into the 18th century. Cuban

<sup>1</sup> There is a certain amount of scholarly debate on the figures provided by Lopez de Velasco. The estimated numbers by other researchers point are a larger number of slaves arriving in the 16th century. See Richmond, D. (2001). The Legacy of African Slavery in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1810. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 35(2) (Fall): 1-16.

composer Esteban Salas y Castro (1725-1803) is well known for his output of approximately 31 villancicos composed in a unique style proper to Cuban 18th century music, even as the genre was starting to show some decline. Predecessors of Salas, however, would set the stage in 17th-century Mexico for the villancico to flourish throughout the Hispanic world. The tradition of villancicos demonstrates the heterogeneity of the musical tradition in 17th-century Latin America, all major cathedrals of the continent developed their own villancicos.

The cathedrals of Mexico City, Puebla, Lima, and others, would see a steady output of villancico writing throughout their histories. This is the case of the Mexican cathedral of Oaxaca for instance, which preserved manuscripts of over 250 of these pieces composed in vernacular texts by Gaspar Fernandes during his tenure as Maestro de Capilla (Chapelmaster) from 1609 to 1620 (Laird, 2001).

It should not be surprising that, with such a large output of villancicos, the fact that their literary text in its origins reflects daily life and the highly mixed ethnic nature of Mexican society in the 17th century, various ethnic groups would make an appearance in the texts and stories of Mexican villancicos of the time. Often this ethnic richness in villancicos is portrayed by depicting different ways of articulating Castilian Spanish or delving into ethnic stereotypes. Composers would often choose to morph the Spanish language in their compositions to phonetically show the characteristics in pronunciation of someone whose first language is not Spanish.

Precedents for these characteristics appeared early on in the cathedrals of the Iberian Peninsula. The Spanish peninsula already hosted a multi-ethnic society, where some Afro-Iberians, Jewish, and Mozarabic peoples lived. Archives in the Madrid National Library can shed some light as to how often, and what languages were chosen in the Iberian Peninsula to depict this ethnically rich environment. In the index of villancico's languages and jargon that of "black" or "Guinean" show 265 references, much ahead of others such as Galician (144) Portuguese (134) gypsy (117)... (Pujoll-Coll, 2021).

This tradition from the Iberian Peninsula would make its way into the new world alongside the villancico genre. Already in Spain itself, we see an interest in what is called a villancico of blacks, a guineo or a negrilla (as I will refer to it forward). Beyond that, the available literature has shown how the depiction of different ethnic groups was a common occurrence in villancico writing of the 16th and 17th centuries. Researcher on this topic Morales Abril (2013) has referred to this phenomenon as a mocking villancico. Such mocking villancicos are often characterized by the deficient mastery of Castilian Spanish by the various ethnic groups being portrayed in the composition.

Morales Abril enumerates the various stereotypical characters often portrayed in novo-Spanish villancicos. As such, the French are often portrayed as

braggarts and deceivers, the Portuguese as proud of their nation, the indigenous peoples as an example of simplicity, poverty, and affection, Galicians and Asturians as peasants (Morales Abril, 2013). For the purpose of this study, I will be looking at the characterization of the African slave in the villancico of negrilla. Of special interest will be the portrayal of the African slave through text and the morphing of Castilian Spanish and issues related to the portrayal of social agency<sup>2</sup> in the texts examined.

## The Negrilla in New Spain

Researcher Claudio Ramirez Uribe describes how African descendants in the new world were seen as caught between two visions, one day out of the authorities, whether for religious or civil who saw them with a certain amount of fear, and the other one represented by theatre and comedy that sees them as unruly, talkative, irrational and dance lovers (Uribe, 2022). It is within this context that we will examine the text of Gaspar Fernandes's villancico de negrilla a 5<sup>3</sup> "Ese rigor e repente" composed in Puebla in 1615. The text portrays various interactions of African slaves with the infant Jesus in a novo-Spanish context. The villancico is closely related to the Christmas celebration.

Portuguese composer and organist Gaspar Fernandes was active in Central America during the first half of the 17th century. He held positions in his native Portugal (Evora) before traveling to Central America. In 1599 moved to Guatemala where he became Chapelmaster, he worked there until 12 July 1606 when he moved to Puebla, Mexico. It is there where he developed most of his compositions. Fernandes was appointed chapel master of the Puebla Cathedral on 15 September 1606. The chapel of music under him was regarded as one of the better ones in the New World. (Stevenson, 2001)

In his negrilla *Ese rigor e repente*, Fernandes follows the stereotypical images defined in the theatrical vision of the black subject in the new world. In the text below from the villancico one can see a depiction of an African slave who is happy and playful. In addition, we see the distorted Castilian Spanish being used to depict the African slave in the refrain of the composition.

2 Social agency involves an effort to understand and organise one's relations, in ways that cause the actualisation of preferred forms of collective society, such as those that might be characterised as postcolonial. (Bingall, 2010)

3 The annotation a 5 shows the number of voices used in the composition. It was customary for choral composers in the 17th century in the New World to indicate this within the title of the composition.

| Original Text   | Castilian Spanish <sup>4</sup>   | English translation <sup>5</sup>   |
|---|--|--|
| <i>Estrillo:</i><br>Sarabanda, tengo<br>que tengo,<br>Sarabanda, tengo<br>que tengo.<br>Sumbacasú,<br>cucumbé<br>cucumbé<br>sumbacasú<br>cucumbé<br>cucumbé.        | <i>Estrillo:</i><br>Sarabanda, tengo<br>que tengo,<br>Sarabanda, tengo<br>que tengo.<br>Sumbacasú,<br>cucumbé<br>cucumbé<br>sumbacasú<br>cucumbé<br>cucumbé.             | Refrain:<br>N/A <sup>6</sup>   |
| ¡Esse noche<br>branco seremo!<br>¡O, Jesús! ¡Que risa<br>tenemo!<br>¡O, Jesús! ¡Que risa<br>tenemo!<br>¡O, que risa, santo<br>Tomé!<br>¡O, que risa, santo<br>Tomé! | ¡Esta noche<br>blanco seremos!<br>¡O, Jesús! ¡Que<br>risa tenemos!<br>¡O, Jesús! ¡Que<br>risa tenemos!<br>¡O, que risa, santo<br>Tomás!<br>¡O, que risa, santo<br>Tomás! | Tonight we will<br>be white!<br>Oh Jesus, how<br>much we are<br>laughing!<br>Oh Saint<br>Thomas, how<br>much we are<br>laughing! |

Figure 1

Refrain of *Ese rigor e repente* by Gaspar Fernandes.

As one can see in Fig. 1, the first part of that refrain shows an onomatopoeic device in the text that captures the rhythmic nature associated with the African slaves. In the second part of the refrain, one sees the altering of Castilian Spanish in order to depict the accent of the African slave. As a characteristic in this passage, we see the final letter S in certain words disappear such is the case of the word *tenemos* (we have) which is morphed into *tenemo*. In a similar manner, the proper name *Jesús* is morphed into *Jesú*. Further morphing of the language takes place with the word *Tomás* which is written in the score as *Tomé*, further changing the orthography of the original Castilian word to in a way mock the accent of the slave. This particular alteration further alludes to the African island of Sao Tomé e Príncipe, which was a hub for the Portuguese slave trade.

The portrayal of an African slave who is happy and dances is shown in the general mood and references to laughter. Additionally, the onomatopoeic references in the earlier part of the refrain make clear the dancing nature after the refrain as a characterization of the villancico de *negrilla*. The onomatopoeia is also used as an allusion to African languages and expressions that the Europeans would not have been able to comprehend.

4 Modern spelling provided by the authr.

5 English translation provided by the author.

6 This material is of an onomatopoeic nature.

| Original Text   | Castilian Spanish <sup>7</sup>   | English translation <sup>8</sup>  |
|---|--|---|
| Queremo que<br>niño vea<br>negro pulizo y<br>galano, que,<br>como as nosso<br>hermano,<br>tenemo ya<br>fantasía.<br>Toca viyano y<br>folía. | Queremos que el<br>niño vea<br>Negro pulido y<br>galan que<br>Que como<br>nuestros<br>hermanos<br>Tenemos ya<br>fantasia<br>Tocar Villano y<br>fulias. | We want the<br>baby to see<br>A clean and<br>elegant black<br>man<br>Just like our<br>brothers<br>We have a<br>fantasy<br>To play villancico<br>and fulias. |

Figure 2

Stanzas of *Ese rigor e repente* by Gaspar Fernandes.

Additional examples are present throughout the stanzas as well, Fig. 2, shows an excerpt from the stanzas where the stereotypical African slaves subject his portrait.

In this case, one can see further morphing of the language. Significant changes in the speech appear in words such as *nuestros* (ours) which is changed to *nosso*, making it much harder to decipher the meaning of what's being said by the subject. Just like in the refrain the letter S at the end of words is dropped. In addition to modifications of the language and orthography, there is the mention of *villanos* and *fulias* both dances coming from Europe which the African slaves portray as their fantasy.

It is important to mention two aspects with regards to the text presented in this section: 1) the mention of European dances by African slaves as something desirable and notionally unattainable since they (the Africans) referred to it as a fantasy; and 2) the lack of social agency in this text, where the subject (the African slave) does not seem able to freely determine his/her actions.

On the first topic, it is crucial to ask the question: why African slaves would not refer to dances as proper to their culture, but rather, fantasize about European dances? The European vision slips into the psyche of the fictional African slave in this text. European dances are seen as an object of refinement and superiority within the social context, perhaps something that the slaves would not attain to experience due to the color of their skin, their role, and their standing within society. Given this, European dances and other aspects of life are portrayed as something of a fantasy for African slaves. This is reinforced as well in Fig. 1 where the text of the refrain quotes the exclamation: *Tonight we will be white!* sung by the African subjects. This is again an example of the Euro-centred vision of the African slave, making it a source of joy to change the color of their skin to white only if for one night.

On the second topic, we see the African subject as

7 Modern spelling provided by the author.

8 English translation provided by the author.

a passive element of the story, yet, it is the African subject who is telling the story. We want the baby to see / A clean and elegant black man, this phrase shows submission by the African slave. While it may be argued that in the context of devotion, a similar phrase could have been attributed to a white European subject, what is particular about this villancico and its text consistent manner in which the African slave is portrayed as lacking agency. The African slave is consistently a subordinate, whether to a European figure or a Christian deity.

Such depictions of African slaves seem to be consistent in the musical literature of the time. While it is difficult to determine true intent in the depictions of African slaves in this literature, it is important to note that such characterizations were some of the more popular ones amongst composers. Indigenous peoples are not characterized either as often, or in the same manner. The literature on indigenous languages shows a better understanding of the native language by the European author than in the case of African slaves. The characteristic treatment of languages such as Nahuatl or Quichua by composers differs greatly. In this case, composers would set entire texts in the original language to European-sounding music. Such treatment of text and language diverges greatly from what we see in the *negrillas*. European composers veer away from onomatopoeic devices and rather set entire, meaningful, and comprehensible texts to music. Music and text are then used as evangelization tool rather than as a source of entertainment.

Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla succeeded Fernandes after his death in 1629 as Chapel Master in Puebla. He was a Mexican composer of Spanish birth. Prior to his arrival in the New World, he held the position of Chapel Master in various cathedrals in Spain. After arriving in Mexico he became assistant Chapel Master in Puebla under Gaspar Fernandes in 1622. His work has been carefully preserved, he wrote various sacred and secular compositions including villancicos. His villancicos are preserved in his *Cuadernos de Navidad* (Christmas Songbooks) his *negrilla* *Tambalagumbá a 6* appears in his Christmas booklet in 1657. This work is written for six voices but the sopranos, altos, and divisi in the tenors and bass parts. The first section of this work is written in cut time, while the rest of it is written in 3/2. As it is characteristic the metric changes in this work show the dance-like character that is typical of the *negrillas*. The structure of the work is typical of a Spanish villancico, in which stanzas are framed by a refrain.

Just as in our previous example, the text revolves around the interactions of African slaves with the infant Jesus. One can clearly see the distortions of the Castilian Spanish entry text by Gutiérrez de Padilla.

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On the second topic, we see the African subject as a passive element of the story, yet, it is the African subject who is telling the story. We want the baby to see / A clean and elegant black man, this phrase shows submission by the African slave. While it may be argued that in the context of devotion, a similar phrase could have been attributed to a white European subject, what is particular about this villancico and its text consistent manner in which the African slave is portrayed as lacking agency. The African slave is consistently a subordinate, whether to a European figure or a Christian deity.

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around the interactions of African slaves with the infant Jesus. One can clearly see the distortions of the Castilian Spanish entry text by Gutiérrez de Padilla.

| Original Text  | Castilian Spanish <sup>9</sup>   | English translation <sup>10</sup>   |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Estrillo:</i><br>Tambalagumbá<br>que ya noso rioso<br>nacirosá<br>Tambalagumbé<br>туру en<br>plocisione<br>vamo a Belé.<br>Ayahu, uchiha<br>quien tene<br>candela nos<br>lumblalá<br>y ya, y ya, y ya<br>tili tilitando lo<br>niño sá | <i>Estrillo:</i><br>Tambalagumbá<br>que ya nuestro<br>rey<br>nacido esta<br>Tambalagumbé<br>Todos en<br>posición<br>vamos a Belén.<br>Ayahu, uchiha<br>quien tiene<br>candela nos<br>alumbrará<br>y ya, y ya, y ya<br>tiri titirando el<br>niño está | <i>Refrain:</i><br>Tambalagumbá<br>That our king<br>Is already born<br>Tambalagumbé<br>All in position<br>Let's go to<br>Bethlehem<br>Ayahu, uchiha<br>Who has fire<br>(light) will light<br>the way<br>y ya, y ya, y ya<br>the newborn is<br>shivering |

**Figure 3**

Refrain of *Tambalagumbá a 6* by Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla.

In the refrain (Fig. 3), we notice already the use of onomatopoeic resources, the word *Tambalagumbá*, which is, in turn, the name of this *negrilla*. Several deformations are used in the orthography of the language. The Castilian word *rey* (king) is changed by *rioso*. In addition, the Castilian words *nacido está* (is born) are significantly morphed into *nacirosá*. These changes to language cement the notion of the African slave and their general command of the Spanish language. In the refrain, we see several instances of the use of onomatopoeic devices *Ayahu*, *Uchiha*, and *y ya, y ya, y ya*, all used with the intention of adding rhythmic character to the piece.

| Original Text   | Castilian Spanish   | English translation   |
|---|---|---|
| A lo portal de<br>Belene<br>venimo negro<br>cuntenta,<br>a hace una<br>plocisione<br>delante la<br>nacimientoa. | Al portal de<br>Belen<br>Venimos<br>los negros<br>contentos,<br>a hacer una<br>procesión<br>delante del<br>nacimientoo. | To the Bethlem<br>portal<br>We come as<br>happy blacks<br>To have a<br>procession<br>In front of the<br>nativity. |

**Figure 4**

Stanza of *Tambalagumbá a 6* by Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla.

Figure 4 shows one of the stanzas where one can appreciate the story weaved in this particular *negrilla*.

In this stanza for distortion of the language is represented by not only changing the letters but also changing the gender of some words. For instance, the Castilian word *nacimiento* (nativity) which is a masculine noun is shown as a feminine noun when spoken by the African slave: *nacimenta*.

Within this stanza, and throughout this *villancico*, the African slave is shown slightly differently than previously shown. Throughout the piece, the slaves are represented as devout Christians. They have the role of organizers of the procession to Bethlehem, and throughout the *villancico*, the African slaves ask various characters to provide goods and services for the procession and for the newborn.

This shows a slightly different view of the African slave subject. It portrays them as having somewhat more agency over their actions. If one is to assume that in the European imagery African slaves have fully converted to Christianity, and that they are indeed devout Christians, the actions narrated in this *villancico* puts them almost at par with their European counterparts. Just like Europeans, they assume the role of organizers and administrators.

While this is a slight change in the discourse and view of the African subject, stereotypical characterizations are not left aside in this *villancico*. The use of onomatopoeic devices, dance-like figures, and distortions of the Castilian Spanish language is present throughout this *negrilla*.

## Conclusion

These two examples of *negrilla* in the New World Cathedral of Puebla show the characterization of the Afro-Mexican subject in music and literature. Accounts of the time explain the views of European settlers on various ethnic groups and these accounts give us insights as to how composers made musical decisions to satirize characters present in their daily lives. In a highly ethnically mixed society, it is logical that the music of the time would represent the ethnic groups present in society. We see evidence of this in the compositions of Gaspar Fernandes and Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla.

Issues of social agency are present in the discourse of the time, and they are represented in the way that the Afro-Mexican subject and society are characterized in music. Such issues provide an insight into what the perception of the European settlers was of the African subject and the role that they occupied in society.

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<sup>9</sup> Modern spelling provided by the author.

<sup>10</sup> English translation provided by the author.

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