

The History of the Present is Not Being Written: Music and Memory in the Transnational Economy

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When Robert Johnson first started to play and sing the blues in the Mississippi Delta during the early 1930s, it was not at all evident that he would one day become known as the king of the delta blues singers. In fact, veteran musicians Son House and Willie Brown thought he was one of the worst guitar players they had ever heard. But soon Johnson dropped out of sight for six months (or a year or two years, depending on which story you believe), and then re-emerged as a highly skilled musician whose virtuosity on the guitar earned him respect and acclaim. According to the local legend in Mississippi, Johnson went to “the crossroads” one midnight where he encountered a large black man who tuned his guitar for him. Immediately, Robert Johnson became the best blues guitarist in the Delta.¹

Personally, I believe that *practice* probably had something to do with Robert Johnson’s improvement on the guitar. But the “crossroads” story is an important one with much to teach us about our present circumstances. Diasporic Africans in Mississippi drew upon West African mythology and folklore in framing the story about Robert Johnson and the crossroads. In West Africa, a crossroads is an important place where decisions must be

¹ Donald Clarke, ed., *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 619-20.

made. Collisions may occur at the crossroads; but as a site where different paths come together, the crossroads also offer a privileged vantage point, an opportunity to look down more than one road. Tricksters lie in wait at the crossroads (especially Legba, who often takes the form of a small white man), but the correct response to trouble can turn danger into opportunity.

In international music studies, we are now at a crossroads. The globalization of commerce and culture within a transnational economy leaves us paradoxically both more united and more divided than ever before. New communications technologies including digital synthesizers, satellites, fiber optic lines, and computers move sounds, sensibilities, ideas, and images across national boundaries at a dizzying pace. The music of Jamaica entertains audiences in Germany and Japan. African soukous provides dance beats for sound systems in Cartagena, Colombia. Indigenous Australian "aborigines" affirm their ethnic identity by singing Caribbean calypso and country and western songs from halfway around the world. Nigerian juju shows traces of Brazilian samba. Punjabi bhangra joins Jamaican "raggamuffin" in Britain to form "bhangramuffin," while Filipino pinoy ballads compete with Pink Floyd for the allegiance of Filipino-American teenagers. The most popular radio station in the world's largest and most competitive radio market (Los Angeles) plays Mexican banda music, while Mexico City audiences cheer Sergio Arau and Tijuana No, who sing U.S.-styled "rock en español." The Japanese Orquesta de la Luz plays Afro-Caribbean salsa; Leila K, a Moroccan teenager, won commercial success in 1990

with a dancehall rap song that she recorded in Sweden.² The Dutch group Rowwen Heze connects the popularity of polka music in their home town of Limburg with polka's popularity among Mexican Americans by recording a cover version of the Chicano band Los Lobos's song "Anselma," giving themselves the nickname Los Limbos in the process.³

Yet the transnational economy that touches us all does not affect us all equally. Transnational corporations control one-third of the world's private sector productive assets. U.S.-based firms employ more than 1.3 million workers in Latin America, 1.5 million workers in Asia, and 2 million workers in Europe.⁴ The growth of these corporations has been made possible not only by new technologies and business practices, but also by neoconservative economic policies, by the evisceration of the welfare state in industrialized countries, and by "structural adjustment policies" imposed on poorer nations through currency devaluation, trade liberalization, the privatization of public enterprises, wage cuts, credit restrictions, and reductions in social spending on education, health, housing, and transportation.

Structural adjustment policies have left 820 million workers (30% of the entire world labor force) either unemployed or working at less than subsistence wages.⁵ African unemployment, for example, has soared to between 15% and 20% according to official figures, but

² George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 14, 19, 42, 143. Daisann McLane, "Turntable Toreros," *Village Voice* (4 May 1993): 64.

³ Mel van Elteren, *Imagining America: Dutch Youth and Its Sense of Place* (Tilburg, Netherlands: Tilburg University Press, 1994), 181.

⁴ Dan Gallin, "Inside the New World Order," *New Politics* ser. 2, vol. 5, no. 1 (1994): 106.

⁵ Robin Wright, "A Revolution at Work," *Los Angeles Times* (7 March 1995): H1.

most estimates peg underemployment in that continent at more than 50%.⁶ The lower wages and reduced public spending mandated by structural adjustment policies guarantee low productivity, underconsumption, unemployment, crippling debts, and slow growth. The World Gross National Product grew by nearly 5% every year between 1948 and 1973, but structural adjustment policies and debt since that time have slowed the growth of World GNP to between 2% and 3% between 1974 and 1989, and to even lower levels since 1989.⁷ In Sub-Saharan Africa, the Gross National Product for all nations declined 2.2% per year during the 1980s. The continent's external debt grew to \$290 billion, nearly 2.5 times larger than it was in 1980. The per capita income of Africa in 1990 had fallen back to the level of 1960.⁸

During the 1980s, real wages fell in Mexico by more than 50%. The share of income earned by workers in that country declined from nearly 50% in 1981 to less than 30% by 1990. Over 60% of the employed labor force in Mexico receives only the minimum wage, an amount that can supply a family of four with only a quarter of its basic needs.⁹ The UN Economic Commission for Africa reported that IMF-World Bank pressures resulted in a fifty-percent drop in spending on health and a twenty-five percent drop in spending on education in targeted African countries during the 1980s.¹⁰ In Latin

⁶ Wright, "A Revolution at Work," 4.

⁷ Gallin, "Inside the New World Order," 114.

⁸ Kevin Danaher, "Introduction," in *50 Years is Enough: The Case Against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund*, ed. Kevin Danaher, (Boston: South End, 1994), 3. Walden Bello, "Global Economic Counterrevolution: How Northern Economic Warfare Devastates the South," in *ibid.*, 18.

⁹ Davison Budhoo, "IMF/World Bank Wreak Havoc on Third World," in *ibid.*, 21. John Gershman, "The Free Trade Connection," in *ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰ Budhoo, "IMF/World Bank Wreak Havoc on Third World," 21.

America, Africa, and Asia, hundreds of thousands of children under five years of age perish every year from preventable diseases or hunger. The richest fifth of the world's population today receives 150 times as much income as the poorest fifth. Even in Third World countries, the gap between rich and poor doubled during the 1980s.¹¹

Structural adjustment policies are responsible for much of the labor migration and asylum-seeking that have shaped international, intercultural musical expression. A United Nations commission acknowledged two million refugees in the world in 1970; today over 44 million people have been displaced within and across national borders. In 1992, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees calculated that world refugee numbers were increasing by 10,000 people per day. As Walden Bello succinctly argues, "Perhaps it is the migrants who most clearly perceive the truth about structural adjustment; it was intended not as a transition to prosperity but as a permanent condition of economic suffering to ensure that the South would never rise again to challenge the North. If that is the case, flight is a rational solution. Migrants are not obsessed nomads seeking the emerald cities..., they are refugees fleeing the wasteland that has been created by the economic equivalent of a scorched earth strategy."¹²

Cultural commodities ranging from popular music to athletic wear play a special role in the transnational economy. Capital flight to low-wage countries makes their production more profitable than ever before, while global marketing creates transnational status symbols and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹² Bello, "Global Economic Counterrevolution: How Northern Economic Warfare Devastates the South," 19.

hierarchies of prestige that allow for greater economies of scale. Yet the same factors that seem to unify the world economy and culture also call attention to grotesque inequities. For example, in the early 1990s, young women in Indonesia received \$1.35 per day sewing athletic shoes for the Nike Corporation that cost a total of \$5.60 to produce, but which sold for from \$45-\$80 each. The workers needed 320 hours in wages to buy one pair of moderately priced Nikes, while the company paid basketball star Michael Jordan \$20 million a year to endorse their brand. Jordan's fee for endorsements exceeded the total wages that Nike paid to all of its workers in six factories.¹³

Nike's products and logos circulate freely around the globe, but the same circuits and networks that bring wealth to Michael Jordan (and even more to those who employ him) bring only exploitation, austerity, workplace surveillance, and unsafe working conditions to the Third World women whose labor produces the products on which the wealth of others depends. Yet, Nike shoes also serve as part of an international youth style that looks to African American culture as a source of aesthetic, political, and moral guidance in the face of global austerity. Along with graffiti writing, break dancing, and rap music, "street" styles using Nike shoes and other kinds of athletic wear contain important symbolic meaning for aggrieved young people around the globe. Hip hop artists like the North African and French youths from Marseilles, France who call themselves I.A.M. (Imperial Asiatic Men), the Maori hip hop activists Upper Hutt Posse from a suburb of Wellington, New Zealand, the Dutch rapper Def Rhymes who incorporates Surinam words and

¹³ Richard J. Barnett and John Cavenagh, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 325-29.

Latin American rhythms into his music, and many other young people from around the globe belong to what French/African rapper M. C. Solaar calls "the cult of the sneaker."¹⁴

Popular music is one of the instruments of globalization, but also a site of resistance against it. The globalization of popular music turns distinct communities with separate histories into unified market segments, but it also brings to the surface suppressed ethnic, regional, and national identities that give distinct local inflections to the cultural forms that appear everywhere. Jocelyne Guilbault is correct to note the hegemony within the "international sound" of "Euro-American scales and tunings, harmony, electronic instruments now seen as standards, accessible dance rhythms, and a Euro-American intonation," yet the sounds of the Australian didgeridu, the Zimbabwean mbira, or the Dominican tambora and guira within international music can provide an augmented sense of place for knowing listeners.¹⁵ North American soul music and South African pop have their own histories in their countries of origin, but they serve as powerful accents to political consciousness in Haiti when added to the rara rhythms and insurrectionary lyrics of Boukman Eksperyans. Second and third generation British Asians have adopted Punjabi bhangra music as an important marker of identity, even for those who are not Punjabi. Yet, while conserving traditional song forms and encouraging traditional social norms, British bhangra

¹⁴ Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 63, 123. Mel van Elteren, *Imagining America: Dutch Youth and its Sense of Place*, 200.

¹⁵ Jocelyne Guilbault, *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 50. Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 10, 11, 139, 144. Jorge Duany, "Ethnicity, Identity and Music: An Anthropological Analysis of Dominican Merengue," in *Music and Ethnicity: The Caribbean and South America*, ed. Gerard H. Behague (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

songs with English, Urdu, and Punjabi lyrics display branching out to other ethnic groups as well. The Safri Boys use samples and breakbeats from rap music behind their Punjabi lyrics, and Asia fuses bhangra and house music sounds.¹⁶ XLNC, a bhangra group from Birmingham, Britain, blends Hindi folk melodies with hip hop samples and combines Middle Eastern ululation with African call-and-response. Traditional gender roles have been challenged within bhangra with the emergence of popular female vocalists including Asha Bhosle, Sasha Hindocha, and the East African-South Asian-and-British singer Bindu Sri.¹⁷

These hybrid cultural products might be seen as evidence of the ultimate triumph of the global market, as proof that commodification turns the unique and particular cultural expressions of diverse peoples into interchangeable products marketed to uncomprehending outsiders largely for their value as novel, exotic, and entertaining objects stripped of their historical meanings. Yet, these permutations in global culture do not erase the experiences of time and space; indeed, in some ways they inflect local and historical expressions with renewed specificity because their differences from other cultural expressions appear more vividly through juxtaposition and comparison. These enormous changes engendered by transnational capital and its structural adjustment policies are not generally being acknowledged or written down as the determinative history of the present, yet they are producing forms of musical expression that document, regis-

¹⁶ Kim Burton and Sairah Awan, "Bhangra Bandwagon: Asian Music in Britain," in *World Music: The Rough Guide*, ed. Simon Broughton et al., (London: The Rough Guides, 1994), 229-31.

¹⁷ Kevin J. Aylmer, "British Bhangra: The Sound of A New Community," *RhythmMusic Magazine* 4, no. 2 (1995): 15-16.

ter, and sometimes even critique the new realities of global economics and communication.

Of course, music can be a deceptive subject for analysis. After all, "The St. Louis Blues" pretends to be a blues, but is really a tango. "Begin the Beguine" claims to be a beguine, but is a bolero. Gospel groups called quartets routinely have five singers, and not only were the Thompson Twins not twins, but neither of them was named Thompson. Yet music does provide us with reliable information as well. Bhangra and bhangramuffin in Britain map the points of correspondence and conflict between Asian Indian and Black Caribbean cultures. Bindu Sri's fusion of reggae and bhangra combines two moments of British colonialism, linking Kashmir with Kingston, at the same time that it calls attention to the presence of Asian Indians in East Africa and in the Caribbean—as "coolie" labor in Jamaica and Trinidad. As the *Times* of London recently observed, Bhangra "seems to cut right across the tight racial divides of inner-city Britain," but it does so through families of resemblance and correspondences from the past as well as through shaping and reflecting shared physical and cultural spaces in the present.¹⁸

Similarly, the recent "indorock" revival in the Netherlands nostalgically recalls the impact of rock'n'roll in that country in the 1950s and 1960s in surprising and unexpected ways. The ethnic identities of the Indonesian Eurasians and Polynesian Moluccans prominent in Indorock bands now appear more important than they did forty years ago, linking the music to the history of Dutch colonialism and to the contours and consequences of Indonesian independence in a way that was less visible decades ago. Although the term "indorock" first ap-

¹⁸ Aylmer, "British Bhangra," 16.

peared in the 1970s to describe the revival of interest in 1960s music, it now serves to expose the suppressed racial subtext of rock'n'roll in the Netherlands embodied in the success of musicians like the Tielman Brothers. Having left Indonesia in 1957 and migrated to Breda in the southern section of Holland, being accustomed to guitar playing in their native country at a time when most Dutch musicians remained wedded to accordions and keyboards, they were well positioned to take advantage of interest in the guitar based rock'n'roll coming from the U.S. The Tielman Brothers got a job at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair in the Hawaiian Village section of the Dutch pavilion. Hired to play for only fifteen minutes every hour when the "Hawaiian Dutch" band was on break, they stole the show with wild rock'n'roll songs and acrobatic antics such as tossing guitars across stage, and playing the guitar with their toes and teeth, behind their heads, and upside down. They became popular throughout Europe, but especially in Hamburg, Germany, where they may have been an early influence on the British band that later became the Beatles. The role played in Dutch musical history by Indonesian immigrants fusing Hawaiian, Polynesian, Asian, European, North American, and African elements testifies to the existence of a prehistory of what we call globalization, a dynamic all too familiar to colonized subjects but seemingly new to citizens in formerly industrialized and colonial centers of power.¹⁹

Similarly, contemporary rai music contains important evidence about French settlement in Algeria and about Algerians in France. Its debts to Spanish flamenco and paso doble music as well as to Moroccan gnawa de-

¹⁹ See Lutgard Mustaers, "Indorock: An Early Eurorock Style," *Popular Music* 9, no. 3 (1990): 307-20.

tail the Spanish and Moroccan presence in Oran.²⁰ The Rastafarian ideas and language that pervade Jamaican reggae reveal the rupture with Africa basic to Caribbean history, but they also display the effects of the dispersal of Jamaican workers to Panama, South Africa, and to the U.S. in the early decades of the twentieth century.²¹ Links between African American and Latin American culture are rarely acknowledged in U.S. history or cultural criticism, but they emerge often in music—in the similarity between the rhythms and marcato attacks employed in the twelve string guitar playing of Leadbelly and Lydia Mendoza, in the fast triplets and syncopated rhumba playing that Professor Longhair learned from “West Indians, Puerto Ricans, Spanish boys” and even “Hungarians” while serving in the Civilian Conservation Corps, and in musical forms ranging from cubop to Latin bugalu to hip hop.²²

Thus, popular music is a repository of history, an alternative way of accessing the past. Today, music also serves as one of the few places where the history of the present is being registered. It is in merengue music made in New York that Dominican workers displaced by rural poverty and urban austerity express their anguish and their aspirations. Andean Indians crowded into the shanty towns of Arequipa and Lima, Peru map the distance between their highland homes and the urban slums through chicha music. Mexican nationals performing the vital low-wage labor responsible for the prosperity of

²⁰ Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 4, 124.

²¹ Robert A. Hill, “Dread History: Leonard P. Howell and Millenarian Visions in Early Rastafari Religions in Jamaica,” *Epoche: Journal of the History of Religions at UCLA* (1981): 32-34.

²² Peter Navaez, “The Influences of Hispanic Music Cultures on African-American Blues Musicians,” *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 2 (1994): 213, 215, 220.

middle class Californians respond to their concentration and their marginalization in Los Angeles by dancing the quebradita to banda music that marks them as uncompromisingly Mexican even though they live in the United States. Merengue, chicha, and banda circulate as commodities marketed by highly centralized monopolies. They bring impressive return on investment to capitalists, and they serve as symbols of safe yet exotic otherness to some "world music" consumers. But they also register the connections linking labor, race, gender, and nationality for low-wage workers in the emerging transnational economy.

Dominicans started coming to New York in large numbers during the 1970s. Just as political terror in El Salvador encouraged the growth of a low-wage garment industry in Los Angeles because it provided an influx of desperate workers for employers interested in violating minimum wage laws and fair labor practices, the Dominican presence in New York has helped capitalists drive down wages and ease New York's transition from a high-wage high-employment center to a low-wage low-employment city. In 1965, U.S. military forces overthrew the democratically elected regime of liberal reformer Juan Bosch and installed into power Joaquin Balaguer, a conservative devoted to the interests of foreign capital. The combination of his austerity policies and the eagerness of the U.S. State Department to stabilize his regime by allowing large numbers of disgruntled Dominicans to move to the U.S. has guaranteed that large parts of Dominican history now happen in Manhattan neighborhoods like Washington Heights (also now known as Quisqueya Heights, in honor of the indigenous name for the Dominican Republic). More than ten percent of the Dominican Republic's twenty million people has moved

to the U.S. since 1970, perhaps as many as 500,000 of them to New York alone.²³

Merengue songs by Dominican artists in New York represent the experience of migration and register the changes that displacement has brought to Dominican Yorks. Juan Luis Guerra's "Visa Para Un Sueno" (Visa for a Dream) tells the story of Dominicans who line up to get légal exit visas for the U.S. as well as of those who desperately try to cross the seas to Puerto Rico in make-shift rafts in order to enter the U.S. illegally. The song suggests determination with its up-tempo rhythms and swirling orchestration, but the sounds of helicopter rotors and a voice speaking English over a bullhorn at the song's conclusion remind listeners of the pain of those picked up at sea and sent home, only to try to emigrate again the next day. In "Ojala que lleuva cafe" (I Hope It Rains Coffee), Guerra takes his lyrics from an anonymous poem that he discovered in the village of Santiago los Caballeros. He sings about the struggles of rural campesinos (agricultural workers) and their struggles to survive in the global economy.

The music of Juan Luis Guerra and of other merengue artists also reflects the ways in which Dominican life and culture has changed because of migration to New York. Merengue lyrics have traditionally expressed Dominican antipathy to their dark-skinned neighbors on the island of Hispaniola in Haiti, but contact with Puerto Ricans, West Indians, and American Blacks in New York has somewhat upset the Dominican racial hierarchy. While Wilfrido Vargas's 1984 merengue hit "El Afri-

²³ Patricia Pessar, *A Visa for a Dream: Dominicans in the U.S.* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 22. Pessar notes that census figures show 332,713 Dominicans in New York City, but that Dominican leaders estimate their numbers as double the figures reported to the Census Bureau.

cano” deployed many traditional anti-black images and stereotypes, Juan Luis Guerra’s “Guavaberry” uses calypso music and English-language lyrics to evoke the voices and experiences of West Indian cocolos in the Dominican city of San Pedro de Macoris. Guerra deployed Afro-Caribbean zouk rhythms from Martinique and Guadeloupe on “Rosalia” and recorded “A pedir su Mano,” a merengue version of the song “Dede Priscilla” by Lea Lignazi from the Central African Republic. Similarly, Guerra’s “El Costa de la Vida” (The Cost of Living) is based on a tune by Zairean guitarist Diblo whom Guerra first heard playing at the New York night spot SOB’s.²⁴ Cuco Valoy draws brilliantly on Cuban influences in his merengues and bachatas, and Wilfrido Vargas mixes zouk, reggae, compas, and rap music with merengue and bachata.²⁵

The low-wage labor available to Dominicans in global cities like New York often changes gender relations within immigrant communities. A wage structure that gives little priority to male wages offers opportunities to immigrant women denied them in their native countries. Dominican merengue in New York reflects some of these changes in the visibility of women within merengue and even bachata, a development that would have been unthinkable in the Dominican Republic twenty years ago. Millie Quezada leads her family band, Millie y Los Vecinos, while Chantelle consists of three Puerto Rican women—Brenda Zoe Hernandez, Annette Ramos Sosa, and Doreen Ann Zayas—produced by another Puertorriquena, Bonnie Cepeda. Alexandra Taveras sings

²⁴ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, “Bachata: From the Margins to the Mainstream,” *Popular Music* 11, no. 3 (1992): 359-60. Sue Steward and Jan Fairley, “Merengue Mania,” in *World Music: The Rough Guide*, ed. Broughton et al., 497.

²⁵ Steward and Fairley, “Merengue Mania,” 496.

with the pop-oriented New York Band, and she presents a female perspective in many of her lyrics. "I tell the women we don't have to take everything that comes to us," she explains, "and they love it." Las Chicas del Can provide a decidedly less feminist image, structuring their stage show largely for the scopophilic pleasure of men, but the visibility of women like Maria Acosta, Las Chicas's trumpet player and leader, and of the group's vocalists Miriam Cruz and Eunice Betances clearly challenges the gender hierarchies of merengue's past.²⁶

Chicha music in Peru also illuminates the ways in which labor-based migration changes traditional identities. Named after a fermented maize beer popular in the shantytowns of Lima and Arequipa, chicha fuses Andean huayno, rock'n'roll, and Afro-Hispanic cumbia and salsa. "It's a product of the migrations in the last few years," explains one radio programmer. "This music didn't exist before, it's a mixture of wayno and cumbia, of coast and highlands, resulting in the cumbia andina, it's a hybrid."²⁷ Taking its name from the genre's first commercial success, the song "La Chichera" (a woman who sells beer) by Los Demonios de Montaro (The Devils of Montaro), chicha addresses issues of romantic love, class, and race. "El Ambulante," written by Jaime Moreyra and performed by his group Los Shapis, recalls his childhood experiences as a street vendor in Peru's underground economy. Starting with a comparison between the rainbow colors of the Inca flag and the brightly colored ponchos that Indigenous Andeans wear to keep out the cold

²⁶ Mark Holston, "The Women of Merengue," *Americas* 42, no. 3 (1990): 54-55.

²⁷ Margaret Bullen, "Chicha in the Shanty Towns of Arequipa, Peru," *Popular Music* 12, no. 3 (1993): 229, 230, 233. William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (New York and London: Verso, 1991), 121-22b.

and for transporting their goods, "El Ambulante" tells what it is like to sell shoes, jackets, and food on the streets while trying to escape surveillance and incarceration. In keeping with their lyrics, Los Shapis express their hybridity on stage by wearing white pants and shirts featuring Andean rainbow motifs across the knees and shoulders, and by playing music that mixes acoustic Andean music and Afro-pop with North American rock'n'roll.²⁸

Like Dominican merengue in New York, Peruvian chicha challenges racial hierarchies by championing mestizaje and claiming prestige from below. Massive unemployment in Peru has exacerbated traditional racial tensions, and popular and official culture in that country has often portrayed the Andean urban presence as a threat to whiteness. But chicha claims indigenous identity with pride and provides great visibility for indigenous peoples. Los Shapis, for example, sold more units in Peru during the 1980s than any other musical group. Chicha reflects, records, and processes changes in identity, breaking down divisions among Andean immigrants from different regions, enabling their children to find a common urban Andean identity.

Banda music serves some of the same functions for Mexican workers in California that merengue does for Dominicans and chicha for Indians in Peru. Popular in Mexican small towns for more than a century, banda exploded as a popular music sensation in 1992 when Los Angeles radio station KLAX 97.9 (La Equis) adopted a format featuring technobanda, which adds synthesizers to the traditional trumpets, reeds, and snare drums. La Equis has become the most popular radio station in Los

²⁸ Charles B. Wolff, Jan Fairley, and Margaret Bullen, "Andean Music," in *World Music: The Rough Guide*, ed. Broughton et al., 589.

Angeles among 25-54 year old adults and second among teens—a highly unusual demographic mix for commercial radio generally targeted to narrowly defined age groups.

The morning drive time show on KLAX features Juan Carlos and his sidekick El Peladillo (the little rascal). Juan Carlos Hidalgo came to the U.S. illegally in 1984 from his native Michoacan to pick strawberries near Oxnard. He enrolled in a Spanish language announcing school, which enabled him to break into the radio business in 1987. He encountered El Peladillo at a party (El Peladillo came dressed as the beloved Mexican comic Cantinflas), and in their comic routines the two address political issues from the perspective of their working-class immigrant audience. “When there are problems in the community, like in the case of Governor Wilson attacking immigrants, we don’t have, as we say, hair on our tongues keeping us from telling the truth,” Hidalgo explains.²⁹

The lyrics of banda songs rarely address political issues, although Banda Machos’s 300,000-unit selling album *Casimira* featured “Un Indio Quiere Llorar” (The Indian Wants to Cry), about a man rejected by his girlfriend’s wealthy and non-Indian family. Banda groups do feature more dark skin and more Indian faces than one generally sees in Mexican popular culture, but the most telling politics of banda come from the ways in which it refigures urban space in post-industrial Los Angeles. Banda dances draw large crowds, mostly Mexican immigrants, who dance the quebradita, draping their rear pockets with a correa (leather strap) engraved with the name of their home state in Mexico—usually Michoacan,

²⁹ David Hayes-Bautista and Gregory Rodriguez, “Technobanda,” *New Republic* (11 April 1994): 10.

Colima, Zacatecas, or Jalisco. They flaunt rather than hide their Mexican origins, refusing assimilation rather decisively, even in the face of Proposition 187 and other measures designed to depict immigrants as a menace to California. Banda is not just traditional Mexican music. Technobanda versions of “Pretty Woman” and “Land of a Thousand Dances” reflect the hybridity of Mexican culture in L.A. As twelve-year-old Karen Velasquez, an immigrant from Colima, explained to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, “I like dancing quebradita mainly because it reminds me of Mexico and this is the dance and music of Mexico in Los Angeles. It’s a combination of the two. When I’m dancing, it makes me feel happy.”³⁰

Merengue, chicha, and banda take the cultural conflicts in immigrant lives and turn them into art. They create new alliances among people previously divided by race, region, gender, and class. They transform Dominican, Peruvian, and Mexican identities, and serve as psychic armor for unemployed and low-wage workers victimized by the transnational economy and despised for their nationality or ethnicity. Expressing anxiety and urgency, they foreground what Frantz Fanon called “unusual forms of expression and themes which are fresh and imbued with a power which is no longer that of an invocation, but rather of the assembling of the people, a summoning together for a precise purpose.” As political and economic crisis increasingly becomes the order of the day, commercial culture is one of the places from which new social movements might arise.³¹

The dangerous crossroads that we confront bring together commercial culture and social movements, low-wage work and highly valued commodities. The global

³⁰ Michael Quintanilla, “Que Cool!” *Los Angeles Times* (16 June 1993): E1, E3.

³¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 243.

economy of urban austerity created by transnational capital radically ruptures traditional connections between culture and community, discursive space and physical place. As the institutions in which we work become increasingly imperiled by the project of capital, and as spending for prisons starts to outstrip expenditures for education, we see that we are at a crossroads too. Everything we are and everything we hope to be depends upon our ability to understand and to aid the migrant populations and low-wage workers who see the true nature of the transnational economy first hand. New networks and alternative academies within and beyond commercial culture will be necessary if we are ever to see new social movements capable of challenging the mobility of capital on its own terms. This may not be the kind of music studies that most of us intended to be a part of years ago, but it offers the only real choice at this crossroads for realizing our own best hopes. In confronting the future that faces us, there is much we can learn from history, from people for whom globalization, low-wage labor, and political repression have been the rule rather than the exception.

In these endeavors, we have much to learn from Robert Johnson. He may not have actually met a trickster at the crossroads on that Mississippi highway at midnight, but he did learn, in the African way, to infuse a material object—in his case, a guitar—with sufficient spiritual power to earn himself escape from the twin pillars of white supremacist power in the Depression Era south—the plantation and the prison. The guitar enabled him to earn a living on the road, to move from town to town playing music for black farm workers and factory operatives in cities across the Midwest and South. “He didn’t care anything about working in the fields,” Son House observed in answer to a reporter’s question about

why Johnson put so much into his music.³² Had he not been able to escape through music, hard labor in the cotton fields, timber camps, or prisons of the old south would surely have awaited him. Racialized police power, lynch mobs, and labor exploitation shaped his music just as surely as did the African retentions and American inventions of the blues.

Two years before Robert Johnson was born, his mother, Julia Major Dodds, lived in Hazlehurst, Mississippi with her husband Charles Dodds and their ten children. Charles Dodds provided for his family through his labors on a farm that he owned and by making wicker furniture for other people's homes. In 1909, Dodds got into an argument with two wealthy white land owners and had to sneak out of town disguised in women's clothing, just a few steps ahead of a lynch mob determined to string him up for having the audacity to argue with white men. Dodds escaped to Memphis and changed his name to Charles Spencer, so that vigilantes seeking Charles Dodds would not find him. Julia Dodds sent eight of her children, one by one, to live with their father in Memphis, but eventually pressure from local white land owners got her evicted. They claimed that she had been delinquent in making tax payments, but everyone knew that her eviction was retaliation for Charles Dodds's successful escape. Left with two children, no money, no land, no livelihood, and no husband, Julia Dodds hired herself out as a farmworker and started to live in labor camps. She met Noah Johnson on a cotton plantation; their son Robert was born on May 8, 1911.

Julia Dodds kept trying to reconnect with her children and their father in Memphis. But even though Spencer had fathered two children of his own with his

³² Peter Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson* (New York: Dutton, 1992), 12.

mistress in Hazlehurst, he was outraged by Julia Dodds's liaison with Noah Johnson and never accepted his wife back. He did give in to her wishes in one respect, however, when he allowed her son Robert to live with him and his other children in Memphis starting in 1914. But Robert returned to the Delta around 1920 to live with his mother and her new husband, Willie "Dusty" Willis in Robinsonville. Robert Johnson became known as Robert Dodds and Little Robert Dusty in Mississippi, as Robert Spencer and R. L. Spencer in Memphis. Almost no one knew him as Robert Johnson until he took that name as his own when he started his career as a musician. Hoping to capitalize on the fame of fellow blues singers Lonnie Johnson and Tommy Johnson, Robert found that it helped him professionally if people felt they were coming to hear the other blues singers named Johnson, or perhaps someone related to them. Consequently, he routinely introduced himself as "one of the Johnson boys" and claimed that his initials "R. L." stood for "Robert Lonnie."³³

Robert Johnson entered this world soon after a lynch mob drove Charles Dodds from Hazlehurst to Memphis, robbing him of his land and livelihood. The blues singer never knew his biological father, Noah Johnson, and he fought so often and so bitterly with his stepfather, Dusty Willis, that he eventually had to run away from home. His rootlessness and restlessness were legendary. Fellow musician Johnny Shines remembers that "you could wake him up anytime and he was ready to go."³⁴ Johnson wandered far from home, playing the three-line twelve bar blues with I-IV-V chord progressions that emerged from the collision between African

³³Ibid., 11, 20.

³⁴Ibid., 31.

and European musical forms on American soil. He played the guitar, an instrument that came to the U.S. from Mexico, but which has a previous history in both Spain and North Africa. Robert Johnson turned homelessness into an art. Cuban poet Nancy Morejon describes dialect as a language with an army chasing after it; Robert Johnson's life shows us a music that drew its determinate power from being forged two steps ahead of a lynch mob, from the desperate need to create an alternative to the plantation and the prison.

Robert Johnson had to invent himself. He had to deploy every element of his imagination and every aspect of his labor to create for himself the things that came easier to others—a name, an identity, a job. But by facing the danger at the crossroads squarely, by drawing on resources from around the world, he solved problems that had no other likely solutions. We need many of the qualities that he demonstrated in his life. But most of all, we need a willingness to fight, to create, to understand that simply because the game is not going well, it nonetheless is not over. Johnny Shines remembers traveling with Johnson and hearing a train whistle in the distance. “Robert, I hear a train,” Shines would say. “Let’s catch it.” Characteristically, Johnson would say nothing in response. He just got ready to go. According to Shines, “if a person lives in an exploratory world, then this is the best thing that ever happened to him”—to get up and go, to hop on that next train, even if its destination is uncertain.³⁵ Much that is going on in the world today is beyond our control, and much of it frightens us. We are forced to move beyond purely national traditions and solutions, to see our problems and our possibilities in international perspective. At the same time, globalization makes the

³⁵*Ibid.*, 31.

peculiarities and particularities of the local even more evident and important than ever before. We need to see ourselves as part of both local and global communities. All of this is daunting and dangerous; we may well lose our way many times in the years ahead. But we can no more afford to ignore how rapidly things are changing than Robert Johnson could afford to ignore the freight trains capable of taking him to another place. If we do not want the train to leave without us, we need to hop on board, to “get ready” as Curtis Mayfield advised in his famous song from the sixties, because like it or not, “there’s a train a-coming.”