

**Peter Wade. *Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*. University of Chicago Press, 2000. xi, 323 pp.**

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*Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia* is an especially welcome addition to the distinguished Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology series edited by Philip Bohlman and Bruno Nettl. First, it boosts the relatively small body of published scholarship in English on Colombian music,<sup>1</sup> and second, it promotes new theoretical directions for research by focusing on commercially popular music and the constructive role it plays in Colombian social politics.

Wade departs from the venerable practice in Latin American music studies of seeking to identify musical and textual evidence of Iberian heritage, a topic addressed by both George List (1973) and Susana Friedmann (1993). When he raises the issue at all, it is not to elucidate the essential character of the music, but instead to evaluate why the identification of Hispanic ancestry has been esteemed. Wade is more interested in the social negotiations and musical reconceptualizations undertaken by Colombians as they reconcile new patterns of musical reception that threaten long-standing attitudes regarding social status.

Scholars other than Wade have explored Afro-Colombian musical practice. George List must be counted as one of the pioneers in this area, but much of his work concerned folkloric practice. Wade, in contrast, directs his attention to commercially disseminated popular music. He also devotes more attention to music of Colombia's Atlantic coast, and he is more interested in the social construction of musical practice than in the construction of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic patterns that dominates many of List's analyses. Matters of musical reception, appropriation, and re-identification, as well as the connection between these behaviors and social politics, concern Wade as much as sound itself. His statement that "The way people think about identity and music is tied to the way they think about place" (2) makes it clear that *Music, Race, and Nation* focuses on the social interpretation of sound.

Like the American scholar Lise Waxer (1998, 2001), who has explored links between local Colombian popular music and the now globally popular salsa, Wade is especially interested in how the development of a commercial music industry in Colombia and abroad affected musical practice in central Colombian cities as well as in outlying regions. The *música*

*tropical* of his title refers to the popular industry label for a broad category of music of Caribbean character, including salsa, *pachanga*, *merengue*, *balada*, calypso and *cumbia*, all of which have exerted mutual influences upon each other and enjoy support across Latin America, the U.S. and Europe. The title also indicates the rather new position Colombian music has come to assume in defining this broad category, both at home and abroad. Today, industry marketers are as likely to refer to the Colombian *cumbia* as any other genre in defining *música tropical*. Not surprising, Colombian musicians and listeners have more nuanced ways of perceiving and referring to *música tropical* and these distinctions are at the heart of Wade's study.

Peter Wade is a Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. His previous work on race and ethnicity includes the books *Blackness and Race Mixture* (1993) and *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (1997). In many ways this new book extends arguments raised in his earlier books, but the much richer discussion of music in this new book will surely attract wider interest. Wade's principal question in *Music, Race, and Nation* is how music from the Caribbean coastal regions of Colombia, known as *música costeña*, came to be central to that country's popular music repertoire and even came to represent the nation. As he explains in the course of the book, social views would have made such an occurrence unthinkable prior to the mid-twentieth century. The relatively new identification with the Caribbean is also surprising if one considers geographic and ethnic criteria.

Colombia covers a geographic area roughly equal to the size of France. It is Latin America's fourth largest country and, in its position at the northeast corner of the continent, is the only one with coasts on both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Its geographic diversity results in a corresponding cultural diversity. The nation is frequently divided into four zones: 1) the Pacific zone along the west coast, which shares a border with Panama; 2) the Andean zone defined by three central mountain ranges; 3) the Caribbean zone along the northern coast; and 4) the largest region, known as the *llanera*, featuring the vast plains that border Venezuela and Brazil. Some scholars, such as Abadía Morales (1995), include a fifth zone, known as the island region, which includes the two Caribbean islands that belong to Colombia: San Andres and Providencia. The capital city of Santa Fé de Bogotá is in the Andean zone and hence the country has long been dominated by cultural policy emerging from this region.

The ethnic population of the country is at least as diverse as the geography. A general breakdown, using categories common in Colombian discourse, estimates that 47% of the country's population is *mestizo* (people of mixed ancestry, blending indigenous and European lineages); 24% is *mulato* (of mixed African and other ancestries); 20% is white; 6% is black;

and 3% is of indigenous ancestry (Abadía Morales 1995:18). The same adjectives used to describe population groups are frequently applied to musical genres and activities, as Wade points out in his introduction.

From the earliest stirrings of independence, elite Colombians worked to create a centralized vision of national culture. Their efforts favored the Andean region and positioned the coastal regions, as well as the people and culture that flourished there, as marginal and provincial. This view was aided by prevailing attitudes regarding race and national identity. Blending of ancestries—African, Hispanic, and other European, with indigenous—occurred throughout Colombia, but the influence of African ancestry has always been strongest along the coasts. The voices guiding the central government supported a racially-defined conception of national identity that highlighted the dominant role of Colombians of white, European ancestry. Thus, although the Colombian elite recognized the distinctive character of regional ethnic (and musical) variety, they generally valued local traditions for what they might contribute to a centralized composite; such traditions were to be absorbed rather than valued for their independent integrity.

Correspondingly, indigenous, mixed, and in particular, black residents and traditions were viewed as lower in status. Wade therefore begins his study by asking how music with undeniably black roots came to represent the entire nation. In chapter 1, he introduces a host of related issues he has considered in answering such a question and presents an extensive literature review. He discusses the tensions between homogeneity and heterogeneity, transformation and appropriation, and nationalism and transnationalism, and how these issues figure into the discourse on Colombian identity. He also presents a general discussion of theories linking gender, sexuality and racial identity. Ideas concerning sexuality and the body in music and dance, as well as those concerning music and capitalism, play an important role in Colombia's rather surprising embrace of music once viewed as provincial and coarse. Perhaps most important is Wade's theory that the history of Colombian popular music reveals a more nuanced understanding of the constructional potential of social identification via popular music. He reminds us that Colombian nationalist elites do more than absorb and modify diverse regional culture; they "resignify a diversity that they also partly construct" (7). He contrasts this view with positions explored by other scholars of Caribbean popular music, like Pacini Hernandez (1995) and Averill (1997), which emphasize the oppositional potential of music.

In chapter 2, "La Costa and Música Costeña in the Colombian Nation," Wade develops his examination of how attitudes toward the music and culture of the Caribbean coast connect to Colombian attitudes regarding

national identity. Drawing on resources that include published literature, school texts, and cultural policy, he explains the positions of the Ministry of Communications, which oversees radio broadcasting; the Ministry of Education, which provides radio programs for state broadcast; and the Ministry of Culture, which directs programs at museums and other state institutions. In particular, he observes how the issue of cultural diversity is treated by these national agencies, noting a persistent tendency to treat diversity as a regional matter, i.e., something characteristic of specific areas of the country, but not a national trait. Wade reminds his readers of the constructive vision at work in such representations since cultural diversity is actually much more pervasive than official policy implies: plenty of Afro-Colombians reside in the central city of Bogotá and not just along the coasts.

Of particular value is Wade's investigation of the growth of the recording industry in Colombia. Far from merely describing stages of development, he uncovers and highlights the importance of the ongoing dialogue between domestic and international markets. The construction of a Colombian national identity, and music representing it, was not simply a national project. Beginning with the first commercial recordings of Colombian music such negotiations had an international character and involved non-Colombian voices. Thus, while prominent Colombian journalists, authors, and politicians were waxing eloquently about how the Andean *bambuco* (a dance song adapted for urban consumption in middle-class salons) best represented the country's national character, the genre was not included in the first recordings of Colombian music made by the Columbia Gramophone Company and Victor Talking Machine Company in 1910 and 1917 respectively. The recordings did, however, include Colombian versions of the waltz and polka, dance genres popular not just in Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America, but around the world. Wade concludes, "apparently at this stage *bambucos* did not interest record companies which were catering to an international audience" (49). *Bambucos* and other forms of central Colombian music popular in the middle-class salons of the era were eventually recorded and Wade discusses the rise of this and other central Andean genres with the central bourgeois public. However, his overriding point is that although music from the Colombian interior regularly dominated national discourse, the international recording market consistently prompted wider visions of national music, especially favoring links between Colombian music and Caribbean styles which were growing increasingly popular with international, especially American, listeners.

Chapter 3 of *Music, Race and Nation*, "Origin Myths: The Historiography of Costeño Music," is dedicated to the popular narratives that circulate

regarding the history of three categories of music: *porro*, *cumbia*, and *vallenato*. Wade's task is a complicated one. While it is convenient to think of these categories as genres of music, such a classification is somewhat misleading as each term embraces a set of representative song types and dance genres. The array of contemporary *cumbia* practices, for example, reflects its mediation in Mexican films, tropical dance bands, and general international circulation, as well as local folkloric custom. According to Abadía Morales, "classic cumbia is never sung" (1995:68), a noteworthy point since even in contemporary commercial variants dance remains most critical. Sung *cumbias* did surface in certain regions, such as Cartegena, and include *mapalé*, a song form featuring call and response between a soloist and chorus, as well as *bullerengue*, *salome*, *malla*, and *porro*, i.e., genres in their own right. Similarly, *vallenato* songs are performed in various rhythms such as *son*, *paseo*, *merengue*, and *puya* whose accompanying dance steps range from slow and song-like to wildly fast, respectively. While Wade argues that Abadía Morales is too eager to draw connections between folkloric and commercially defined practice, many of these distinctions persist in contemporary Colombian practice and are recognized by listeners as well as performers.

Wade's basic categories (*porro*, *cumbia* and *vallenato*) also evoke favored instrumental combinations as well as song styles and dance rhythms. Here again, simple definitions are impossible. A *vallenato* ensemble featuring the signature instrumental combination of accordion (*acordeón*), scraper (*guacharaca*) and box drum (*caja*) might perform a *cumbia* or *mapalé* while a typical *porro* ensemble featuring brass and wind instruments might play a *cumbia* or even a *currulao* associated more with the Pacific Coast. In short, it is better to think of *cumbia*, *porro*, and *vallenato* as the signature designations for stylistic traditions. Wade focuses less on the distinctions within the traditions and more on aspects they share.

Wade finds that in all three traditions folklorists and historians<sup>2</sup> have projected the origins of the style further back in time than can be confirmed by material evidence; in fact such evidence often contradicts popular assumptions. Another tendency is to ascribe the origins of the genres to one specific region, such as *vallenato* to the town of Valledupar, and define early performances as a process of re-casting folk practice by incorporating modern European instruments. Local historians have also typically portrayed the genres emerging from these coastal traditions as triumphs of *mestizaje*, or racial mixture, representing the idealized cultural blending of tri-partite roots: indigenous, European, and African. Wade rejects the simplifications embedded in such popular narratives and offers explanations that reveal the bids for power that lie behind their construction. He notes, for example, that the conventional narratives of

*mestizaje* regularly embody an ideology of erasing cultural difference through blending (or, in many cases, whitening).<sup>3</sup> While these narratives frequently appear to celebrate diversity, they also have the little-recognized effect of reinforcing cultural hierarchies by continually articulating difference. Thus the narratives that define *costeño* traditions as authentic (meaning rooted in folkloric practice and reflecting an idealized cultural blend) tended to simultaneously define these traditions and their supporters as backward and less cultivated (66).

Wade's general skepticism regarding accepted narratives derives in part from his study of Gilard (1987) and Bermúdez (1985, 1996), but the revised version he offers in his book is groundbreaking, if nothing else for the breath of his explanations. He has worked assiduously to discover the perspectives that have shaped conventional explanations regarding music history and practice. As noted earlier, he shows the role of the recording industry in the development of various *costeño* styles, in contrast to the myths that posit a purely rural gestation.

That said, two concerns come to mind. First, despite his unveiling of existing origin myths, one might argue that Wade has constructed a myth of his own. His tendency to lump together different musical practices into one general category called *costeño* music is a construction that many will see as an oversimplification, albeit one that is frequently favored by the record industry.

Wade's acceptance of this generic categorization is somewhat surprising when one considers that historically the styles of music that he examines have embodied "blackness" (to use Wade's term) in rather different ways. The *currulaos* of the Pacific Coast, and even the many types of *cumbia* associated more with the Atlantic coast, embody far more overt African traits than does the *vallenato* tradition. While Wade may be emphasizing the similarities across styles because it has become fashionable to do so in the contemporary entertainment industry, it is not my experience that Colombians hear these styles as one undifferentiated group, as the repeated use of the term might imply.

At various points in the book Wade does distinguish between different styles and practices in Colombian music, notably in chapter 2 where he provides a historical overview of various styles. He also invites readers to explore specific musical differences between a modern *porro*, *cumbia*, and *vallenato* (in *paseo* rhythm) in appendix B where he has included a representative transcription of each. The transcriptions, prepared by Alex Miles, are prefaced by a description of instrumentation and conventional practice for each ideal type. Wade's own discussion of musical characteristics does not refer to these transcriptions, but he does detail individual performers' approaches to instrumentation, rhythmic choices, singing

styles, program formats and recording policy. However, later in the book his references to *costeño* music as a general category become more prominent. Wade is likely aware of his own myth building; indeed, he discusses briefly his role in the “tangled webs of knowledge production” in the final chapter of the book (232). Thus a reader should be prepared to do some de-tangling.

Second, while Wade’s research has facilitated analyses of popular genres that reveal fascinating processes of social negotiation, his revisionist stance is also complicated. Although he never defines his work in terms of advocacy, the reader would be hard-pressed not to sense that Wade applauds (at least on some levels) Colombia’s relatively recent embrace of Afro-Colombian culture. At the same time, by unveiling the rationalization, and continued racism, that underlie the integration of coastal customs into the central Colombia consciousness, Wade risks undermining the integrity of the people whose story he is telling, particularly when his conclusions stress the ultimate flexibility of interpretation. This is a danger that Wade is well aware of and that he addresses more directly in *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (1997:116–17).

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 outline the history of *costeño* music, again focusing on the three genres of *porro*, *cumbia*, and *vallenato*. Exactly how these styles changed over time, how their practices overlapped, and how people viewed such developments form the heart of Wade’s investigation. He identifies three major periods of activity. In chapter 4, he reviews the 1920s and ’30s during which *costeño* traditions develop as commercial music popular in Colombia. Chapter 5 surveys the 1940s and 50s when the coastal style made inroads into the Colombian heartland, though not without inciting intense reactions. One example is the Colombian composer and musicologist Daniel Zamudio, who claimed that all music with African roots was “insidious” and that *costeño* music was “like the rumba,” a threat to a “truly genuine” Colombian national identity (126). Wade also examines the views of central Colombians who were attracted to *costeño* music, in part because they perceived it as happy, sensuous, and representing a warmth they felt missing in the elite social circles in the central cities. In chapter 6 Wade discusses the 1950s and 60s, the period during which Colombian popular music, increasingly dominated by *costeño* forms, gained new international footing, primarily as dance music. *Cumbia*, in particular, represented Colombia’s answer to the popular rumba, tango, and mambo sweeping U.S., Latin American, and European markets.

This last period was spurred by the growth of Colombia’s domestic recording industry. Conventional readings of this development tend to consider *costeño* musicians as the exploited victims of a recording industry that appropriated and commercialized their authentic music. Wade resists

these readings as overly simplified and points out that *costeño* musicians shared in, and even directed the commercialization of *vallenato*, *cumbia* and *porro*.

Wade further insists that the increasing commercial success of this music rests to a large degree on its associations with happiness and sexual openness and he discusses this issue for different time periods and geographical regions, but not with equal attention to each. Clearly Colombian attitudes regarding the sensuous nature of the music contributed to both acceptance and rejection of *costeño* music, but the overall discussion of this issue is too general. Although a brief paragraph in the final chapter (235) summarizes shifts in social mores and changing attitudes towards sexuality in society, more detailed discussion of such shifts is needed as well as clarification of how sexuality relates to changing visions of national identity.

Wade's most convincing analysis of sexual associations appears in chapter 7, "Costeños and Costeño Music in the Interior." Here he focuses on listener reception, drawing on a collection of sixty-one interviews of residents in the central cities of Bogotá and Medellín, and, for comparison, from Baranquilla on the Atlantic coast. Compiled with the aid of four assistants, these accounts supplemented printed documentation and Wade's first-hand observations and provided the basis for a comparative analysis of individual attitudes towards *costeño* music. For residents of central Colombia, music of the coast has long been associated with overt sexuality, a care-free and happy manner, and sensuous dancing and courtship. This view contributed both to popular acceptance and elite resistance. Respondents' comments regarding dance lead Wade to theorize that dance provided an opportunity for coastal Colombians to express their sensuality and for central Colombians to embrace, even embody, both a desired sensuality and their corresponding interpretations of racial difference.

However, despite the growing acceptance of coastal music in elite social circles, *costeño* people continued to be viewed with suspicion. Wade writes, "elements of *costeño* identity could be appropriated, even while *costeños* themselves—or perhaps more precisely the image of them as a category—might be kept at arms length" (210). Later in this section he reflects on the methodological difficulty of discussing *costeños* as a group as well as the difficulty of understanding a repertory of commercial music as belonging to a specific group (although at times he has done both in this book). It is a cautionary statement worth noticing, because it reminds readers of how the very constructive practice Wade is examining necessarily pervades his own theoretical explanation.

In "Multiculturalism and Nostalgia in the 1990s," chapter 8, Wade directs the reader's attention to some of the most recent artists to re-interpret Colombian popular music, particularly the music of the 1950s



and 60s, for a new global market. Among the musicians that Wade profiles here is the singer Carlos Vives, who became a contemporary superstar when he chose to reinterpret classic *vallenato* for new audiences using the technology and sound resources commonly associated with rock performance. Wade observes that Vives's project, despite being more self-conscious, is not entirely new for Colombian musicians. It involves balancing personal aspirations for commercial success with a genuine respect for local tradition—a process Wade outlines earlier in the book. He notes that similar balancing acts back in the 1940s, such as by singer Lucho Bermúdez, to name just one example, account for the very existence of *porro* and related genres as commercial popular music. Indeed the repertory that came to be regarded as “golden” in the subsequent decades resulted from the negotiations between regional recording artists and the international recording and communications industry.

The concluding chapter briefly addresses the problems of postmodern interpretation of culture. Throughout *Music, Race and Nation* Wade highlights how popular music is constantly subject to multiple interpretations. He concludes that the role of the ethnographer today is to “challenge categories which are taken for granted *in a given social context*” (232, emphasis in the original). He then offers several answers to his original question regarding why *costeño* music with its associations of blackness and tropicality, came to be regarded as Colombian national music. First he suggests that the coast was the first region to profit from industrialization, and thus it and its music came to represent modernity in the eyes of many Colombians. A second reason is that music of this region represented a multicultural perspective that could be, and has been, interpreted in many different ways, as the above discussion of race and sensuality indicates. Wade mentions that the diversity of the region was further enhanced by affiliations with other Caribbean cultural products, especially Cuban dance music that has long dominated the Latin American entertainment industry. Wade also notes the additional impact of the international attention garnered by Colombian author and Nobel prize-winner Gabriel García Márquez, whose writings about his country celebrate its ties to Caribbean culture.

It is at this point that a reader might wish that Wade had taken pains to elaborate or at least draw clearer connections between these points and the data presented earlier in the book. His early analysis of the communications and recording industry emerging along the coast did not emphasize any status the region itself accrued as being modern. Wade's ultimate conclusion regarding the flexibility of interpretation is also somewhat disappointing. His final chapter would be more useful to scholars hoping to build upon his theories if he had summarized how this flexibility operates,

especially since his earlier discussions suggest more definitive conclusions than he presents at the end. As Wade has shown, the dissemination, and reception of *costeño* music permit it to be interpreted as representing one ideological pole or another; the same music might simultaneously represent both modernity and tradition, regional and international affiliation, political purpose and sensuous entertainment, and/or racial distinction and racial transcendence.

Despite these minor criticisms, *Music, Race and Nation* is a very fine book. It provides an enormous wealth of data on Colombian popular music and raises a provocative set of theories regarding how race, sexuality, commerce, and technological development intersect as Colombians, individually and collectively, draw on music to define their identity in local, national, and international contexts. The identification of these contexts, and their nuanced components, is a valuable contribution to both popular music scholarship and social science. Although Wade's observations concern Colombian experience, they are relevant to anyone interested in popular music studies and will be of special interest to scholars of Latin American music and culture.

#### Notes

1. See Bermúdez (1985, 1996), Friedmann (1993), Gradante (1998), List (1973, 1980, 1983, 1991), Manuel (1988), Marre and Charlton (1985), Pacini Hernández (1995), and Waxer (1998, 2001).

2. Wade examines a large body of literature concerning each of the genres of popular music featured in his book. While some, like the traditional studies by List, Abadía Morales, and Perdomo Escobar (1963), represent work by highly respected scholars, other sources include transcriptions of oral lore such as the widely cited work by Fals Borda (1979–88). Scholars who challenge these well-established readings include Gilard (1987) and Bermúdez, and Wade draws on their work as well.

3. Indeed, it maybe that Wade is best known among social scientists and scholars in Latin American studies for his theory of *mestizaje* as a whitening process.

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