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Popular Music / Volume 31 / Special Issue 02 / May 2012, pp 217 - 230

DOI: 10.1017/S0261143012000062, Published online: 23 April 2012

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### How to cite this article:

Hettie Malcomson (2012). New generations, older bodies: *danzón*, age and ‘cultural rescue’ in the Port of Veracruz, Mexico. Popular Music, 31, pp 217-230 doi:10.1017/S0261143012000062

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# New generations, older bodies: *danzón*, age and ‘cultural rescue’ in the Port of Veracruz, Mexico

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## Abstract

*Understandings and discourses about age have tended to be instrumental to popular music in terms of production, promotion and consumption, and many studies of popular music have taken younger people, and especially ‘youth’ cultures, as their subject matter. Where older people have been considered, the focus has mostly been retrospective, that is on their experiences when young and their attitudes to contemporary ‘youth’ cultures, rather than relationships between the temporal dimension of the life course and music. As the case of *danzón* illustrates, stereotypes that older people are resistant to novelty, change and possibility are ill founded. Moreover, where age is used to justify rescuing ‘cultural traditions’, caution may be called for and analysis required to assess what lies behind such claims and why. In Veracruz, the older age of the majority of *danzón* performers is evoked to ‘authenticate’ this local ‘tradition’, and justify its ‘rescue’ and promotion by Veracruz’s culture industries. Yet, older people are not considered repositories of ‘tradition’ or sought out as ‘authentic’ practitioners. Instead, many older performers are new to *danzón*.*

There are countless examples, spanning the globe, of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s well-known concept of the ‘invented tradition’ (1983); examples relating to music, dance, material culture, language, ritual and other practices. The notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘invented tradition’ have often intersected with understandings and discourses around age. For example, the demise of traditions has been allied to fears of practices, genres and practitioners becoming ‘old’ and ‘dying out’. In this article, I consider a popular music-dance form which bears many of the characteristics of an invented tradition and that is predominantly performed by people aged between 50 and 80-plus.<sup>1</sup> Far from dying out, however, the popular Cuban music-dance form *danzón* is flourishing, particularly in Mexico. Drawing from ethnographic data, I explore why local culture industries in the Port of Veracruz (Mexico) frame *danzón* as an ‘older’ people’s music-dance form and to what ends.<sup>2</sup> My focus here is predominantly *danzón* dancers, the main consumers of this music, who gather for an hour most evenings in Veracruz’s principal square (or nearby plazas) to dance to the Municipal Band or local *danzoneras* (*danzón* music ensembles).<sup>3</sup> I suggest that the older age of many *danzón* practitioners is used by Veracruz’s culture industries to ‘authenticate’ this practice as a local ‘tradition’, to justify its ‘rescue’ and its promotion to younger generations. However this creates a tension since many of these older performers are new to *danzón*: they form the new generations of this partly invented tradition, disturbing notions of older people assuring the continuity of

the past into the present. In the final section of the paper, I consider why the majority of *danzón* practitioners (as opposed to the local culture industries) insist that *danzón* is *not* an age-specific phenomenon. Let me begin however by introducing *danzón*, its trajectory in Mexico, and the people who perform it in Veracruz.

*Danzón*, a precursor of the *mambo* and the *cha-cha-chá*, emerged in Cuba in the 19th century and, like other fashionable genres, was soon performed in Mexico and beyond (as I discuss more extensively elsewhere, Malcomson 2011). *Danzón* was particularly popular in Mexico's Gulf coast Port of Veracruz and in the capital. Mexico City's dance halls were renowned for their *danzón* (as depicted in 1940s films such as Julio Bracho's *Distinto Amanecer*, 1943; Emilio El Indio Fernández's *Salón México*, 1948; and Alberto Gout's *Aventurera*, 1949). Meanwhile, Veracruz was considered the 'adoptive' parent of *danzón* due to its Afro-Caribbean 'heritage' and close ties with Cuba (after centuries of sea traffic between the ports of Havana and Veracruz). Both Veracruz and Mexico City were famed for their *danzoneras* and their dancers. A few dancers (mostly men, despite this being a couple dance) acquired 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 75) through their ability to (lead in the) dance, accumulating prestige by winning competitions, which gave them legitimacy to teach and judge others. The 'field' (Bourdieu 1993) in which they operated was fairly local, limited to Mexico City and Veracruz with little competitive interaction between the two. However, in the 1960s and 1970s the popularity of *danzón* waned somewhat, and by the 1980s the field in which dancers acted was transformed. A form of revival movement (Livingston 1999) began to emerge. People talked about 'rescuing' *danzón* (from its imminent downfall), formalising its transmission and choreography, and ritualising its performance in spectacles. New pedagogies emerged and the dance became more stylised, more codified, more disciplined. The emphasis on individual champions shifted to dance groups, legitimated as civil associations and directed by group leaders who created performances ('exhibitions') of groups dancing choreographed steps in unison ('routines'). Meanwhile, the Mexican government was decentralising cultural institutions: local cultural centres burgeoned, such as Veracruz's Culture Institute (IVEC) which opened in 1987. A very few individuals created institutionally backed *danzón* empires in Mexico City and Veracruz, such as Miguel Zamudio. Based at Veracruz's IVEC, Zamudio is leader of the nationally renowned younger dancers' group *Tres Generaciones* ('Three Generations'), promotes an annual *danzón* festival, a 'national' competition and a network of groups. Further spurred by the release of María Novaro's hugely successful film *Danzón* in 1991, the popularity of *danzón* spread throughout Mexico, particularly among older people. By the beginning of the 21st century, a new generation of *danzón* dancers had emerged who were predominantly over 50 years old. However, *danzón* remained relatively non-commercial compared to other popular music-dance forms.

The increased popularity of *danzón* since the 1980s has reinforced the idea that *danzón* is something *Veracruzano*, despite (and because of) its Cuban 'origins' (see Malcomson 2010b). This concept of local identity has not only been significant in attracting people to *danzón*, but also in securing institutional support for performances predicated on notions of rescuing a local tradition. Veracruz, Mexico's largest port, is a cheaper holiday destination than Cancún or Acapulco. Local people told me that Veracruz mostly attracts lower-class tourists from Mexico City and Puebla, but also the odd middle-class and foreign tourist, as well as sailors who disembark in search of the city's pleasures. Veracruz is renowned for its festive atmosphere, its

music, its dancing, and its annual pre-Lenten carnival attracts over two million visitors. From the 1980s, *danzón* increasingly became a resource for cultural tourism in Veracruz (although usually an added value for tourists, rather an incentive to visit the city, Piedras Feria 2006, p. 63). The local government programmed and funded more *danzón* events in the main square (Figures 1 and 2): they hired the *Danzonera Alma de Veracruz* musicians as permanent employees in 1991, in addition to the Municipal Band, and provided space for *danzón* dance groups to rehearse and perform. While dancers choose to perform *danzón* as a leisure activity, *danzón* musicians are paid to perform, rarely seeking out *danzón* as a genre to play beyond a form of employment. In return for paying the *danzonera* musicians' salaries and providing chairs and space, the authorities get a ready-made tourist spectacle, with dancers avid to perform.

While the (predominantly male) musicians in the Municipal Band were employed full-time by the local government in the 2000s, the (all-male) *Danzonera Alma de Veracruz* musicians were employed part-time (and members of other *danzoneras* work on an *ad hoc* basis). Most of the *Danzonera Alma de Veracruz* musicians had other jobs – an instrument repairer, electrician, primary school teacher – or were retired from working as builders, factory workers and shipbuilders. Their ages ranged from mid-thirties to mid-eighties, with the majority over 60. Of the dancers who regularly frequented Veracruz's *danzón* events, the majority of the male dancers were retired, having worked in the docks, the railways, the TAMSA Steel Tubes of Mexico factory, in other manual trades or in small businesses. While many of these men were still married, the majority of female *danzoneras* were widowed, divorced or separated. Married couples were scarce and most women danced in public settings before and after (but not during) their married lives. Some of the regular female dancers had widows' pensions inherited from their deceased husbands, or were supported by their children; others worked as secretaries, seamstresses, cooks, teachers. Many newcomers to *danzón* were in their early fifties and still worked, but there was also a sprinkling of younger dancers (many of whom were in, or had passed through *Tres Generaciones*, formed in 1987, or Veracruz's first large group, *Hoy y Siempre* ('Today and Always'), established in 1982). Some younger dancers were more



Figure 1. *Danzonera Alma de Veracruz* and members of Veracruz's Grupo Oficial dance group performing *danzón* on the stage of the Port's main square, 28 April 2007.



Figure 2. Rosa María Cruz Herrera and Jorge Enríquez Pérez dancing *danzón* in the corner of the main square, Port of Veracruz, Mexico, 20 November 2010.

educated and self-identified as slightly higher class than the older dancers (and their parents' generation).

Motivations for performing the dance varied slightly according to age. Some older people suggested that they danced *danzón* precisely because the music is slow enough to dance with ease. One 74-year-old man (born in 1933) commented that he enjoyed *danzón* as he was no longer nimble enough to dance the *mambo* as he had in his twenties. That said, many older dancers recounted how their favourite part of *danzones* was the slightly faster final *montuno* section (taken from the Cuban *son*).<sup>4</sup> Other older dancers expressed a desire to get out of the house, especially women: the evening music-dance events in Veracruz's plazas (mostly *danzón* and Cuban *son*, sometimes *son jarocho*)<sup>5</sup> provide an opportunity for female regulars to go out alone (in the knowledge they will meet people they know) and sit in these public squares, a more male prerogative during the daytime. Still others told me that *danzón* was their therapy, both mental and physical (as Sevilla 2003, explores in relation to Mexico City's dance halls). Meanwhile, several younger dancers in *Tres Generaciones* (aged between 15 and 25) were surprised that they had become interested in *danzón*, given its associations with older people, and joked about having to explain themselves to their peers at school and university. However, their motivations for performing *danzón* overlapped with those of older people: a desire to dance and learn choreographies, a love of the music, an opportunity to meet new friends and enjoy the conviviality of a group, to find romantic partners, to dance in staged performances with others, wear 'elegant' clothes, and perform a music-dance form that is considered characteristic of Veracruz.

### *Danzón*, age and 'cultural rescue'

Prior to the 1980s, 'rescue' rhetoric had been largely absent in Veracruz, distinct from the nostalgic laments that were being voiced by, among others, the local poet and chronicler, Francisco Rivera Ávila *Paco Pildora* (1908–1994). There is still much nostalgia in evidence for Veracruz's past, particularly from the 1920s until the 1980s when

there was a major shift in economic and political power to (and from) the unionised dockers. This began with the 1920s post-revolutionary labour struggles and the re-creation of carnival in 1925 (see Wood 2001, 2003), and peaked in the 1970s towards the end of Mexico's economic 'miracle'. The (male) dockers, together with the tram- and railway-men, became renowned as the heart and soul of this festive town, creating carnival *comparsas* (dressing up, playing instruments and dancing in carnival parades), hosting parties in the patios of the tenement blocks where many of them lived, and dancing to *danzoneras*, big bands, *son cubano* ensembles and local celebrities such as Toña *La Negra* (1912–1982) and Agustín Lara (1897–1970). However, this period was dramatically brought to a close with the 1980s debt crisis, culminating in the disempowerment of the dockers' unions and President Salinas de Gortari's requisition of the port in 1991. Veracruz is still described and represented as a city where music, dancing and carnival never stops, yet the privatisation of the port marked a juncture which is often evoked with nostalgia, separating a glorious past from a more commercialised, impersonal present. There is a nostalgia that during this 'golden age' Veracruz's musicians were at their finest, as were its *danzón* dancers who, I was told, were 'renowned both nationally and internationally'. Yet these renowned dancers are long dead (such as *El Charecuca*, Inés *La Rompecuero*, *La Babuca*, Pepe Castro, Miguel Díaz Andrade *El Venado*, and Sigfrido Alcántara who was interviewed in Trejo 1992).

The emergence of rescue rhetoric in relation to *danzón* (in both Mexico and Cuba) was possibly spurred by the 1979 centenary of the 'first' official performance of a *danzón* (*Las Alturas de Simpson*, composed by the Cuban, Miguel Faílde Pérez). The reasons given for the need to rescue *danzón* included the ageing of both *danzón* dancers and musicians, the lack of interest from younger people and the reduction in the number of Mexico City's dance halls. However, I would suggest that the timing of this urge for revival was partly due to broader socio-economic changes, whereby culture became a resource to be rescued. As Yúdice (2003) has argued, with the (multinational) neoliberal (market-oriented socio-economic) turn of the 1980s, the concept of culture as a resource emerged (a resource that could now not only promote wellbeing, but also 'solve' social problems). Moreover, culture became something to be 'managed' by administrators, whether for the purposes of tourism or social amelioration. From the 1980s, rescue rhetoric was evoked in Veracruz and Mexico City as a justification for *danzón* dancers to form officially legitimated dance groups, as well as to fund the promotion and dissemination of *danzón* to new generations of younger people. *Danzón* schools and groups were set up for young people and children, who were considered the hopes for the future of *danzón*, as well as for older people. However, many of these younger *danzón* dancers stopped dancing in their twenties, leaving the groups to marry, study and work. Yet, far from dying out, *danzón* continued to proliferate throughout Mexico and groups multiplied.

Younger people are seen and promoted by Veracruz's culture industries as the next *danzón* generation, rather than the 50-plus-year-olds who actually form these new generations. Older people are considered by Veracruzanos as pertaining to the past and the detail that many are new to the dance is rarely acknowledged. People do not always do the same things throughout their lives, contrary to stereotypes that deny older people temporality and possibility. Although there are a few older people who danced *danzón* along with other genres in dance halls when they were young, most (re)joined the dance once they were retired, widowed, separated

or divorced and once their children were adults. *Danzón* is something that these newly recruited older people now do, and sometimes did when they were young (especially those aged above 70), rather than the frequently heard myth that it is something people have done *all* their lives. For example, one 74-year-old female *danzonera* (born in 1932) was just 10 years old when she started dancing with her parents at *Villa del Mar*, a renowned local dance hall; she stopped dancing when she married and moved away from the city, but resumed upon separating from her husband and returning to Veracruz in the 1980s. The dancing lifespan of older people often outstretches that of the young; for example, someone joining the dance as early as five years old may dance for 20 years, leaving the dance aged 25 to marry, while a 50-year-old newcomer may dance for 30-plus years, surpassing the younger dancer by a decade. In the 2000s, there were no children who danced *danzón* in Veracruz and very few young people. Meanwhile, 50-plus-year-olds continued to join the ranks of *danzón* dancers, particularly *danzón* groups, far outnumbering other age groups. 'Older' dancers create opportunities to evoke rescue rhetoric. By being older, they (appear to) create a continuity to the past (which may or may not be imagined), thereby 'authenticating' this local 'tradition' and contributing to nostalgic renditions of Veracruz as a town where local people party throughout their lives, a town with a long heritage of *alegría* ('happiness').

When a rhetoric of rescue is invoked in Veracruz – in justification for funding and to legitimise or critique the formation of music and dance groups – it relates more to continuity into the future than to the conservation of the past, or of the past in the present. As I introduced above, from the 1980s *danzón* took on many of the characteristics of what Hobsbawm and Ranger coined an 'invented tradition' (1983), an idea well-worn within scholarship. Usually linked to an historic past, an invented tradition is a practice, governed by rules, that 'is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization' (Hobsbawm 1983, p. 4). *Danzón* dancing in particular has been formalised in terms of transmission (in schools and groups) and practice (a more codified dance), and ritualised in terms of the creation of spectacle. Yet, the choreographic transformations that occurred are not 'characterized by reference to the past' (Hobsbawm 1983, p. 4), as are Hobsbawm and Ranger's invented traditions. Nor is there a search for authoritative past forms of dancing or playing *danzón* as are often found in music revivals (see Livingston 1999). It is insightful here to compare *danzón* with *son jarocho*, a music-dance form also considered *Veracruzano* (and associated with the State as well as the Port of Veracruz).

At the end of the 1970s, *son jarocho* was marginal in the south of the State of Veracruz, and generational continuity had all but ceased. There existed, however, what Ávila Landa (2008) describes as urbanised, 'folkloric' *son* (epitomised by Lino Chávez) and 'commercial' *son* performed by folkloric ballets and by ambulant musicians donning stereotypical *jarocho* clothing, often for tourists. However, around 1979, a *son jarocho* revival movement emerged (epitomised by the group *Mono Blanco*) which, like *danzón*, saw the formation of civil associations, institutional support for groups, workshops, festivals and the emergence of a very few professional cultural entrepreneurs. There are, however, striking differences between the *danzón* and *son jarocho* scenes, despite their co-existence in Veracruz. These go beyond the distinction that *son jarocho* is perceived as being 'born' in (the State of) Veracruz, while *danzón* was merely 'adopted' by Veracruzanos (particularly in the Port). For example, *son jarocho* aficionados tend to be much younger than *danzoneros*, often attracted to performing the music as much as the dance. Moreover, notions of authenticity play a

lesser part in *danzón* discourse and practice than they do in *son jarocho*. 'Authentic' renditions of *danzón* music or dance are rarely sought out, and older performers are seldom consulted as sources of a more authentic past to be emulated in the present. The older age of several members of the (music ensemble) *Danzonera Alma de Veracruz* provided a form of authentication for this music, and most older musicians and dancers who perform well are respected for their abilities and knowledge (particularly those who have done so for many decades), but they are not considered repositories of 'traditional' knowledge. Some dancers recalled nostalgically how their parents and grandparents had performed *danzón*, but there was no sense that they were attempting to create a continuity to that past in terms of performance practice.

In Veracruz, a distinction is made between two styles of dancing *danzón*: the more codified *académico* ('technical') style which emerged in the 1980s and is transmitted in groups, and the older *lírico* ('free style') *danzón* which, I was told, involves 'just following the music'. Yet the difference between the two is not always clear, and often relates to whether people dance in groups (*académico*) or not (*lírico*). The older *lírico* style is not considered 'heritage' or more 'authentic' than the newer *académico* style. Where authenticity is evoked is in relation to closed and open style dancing. The closed style (where dancers remain in closed embrace) is considered characteristic of Veracruz, whereas the open-position style (with dancers usually holding one hand and often turning) is common in Mexico City. Although tensions arose in the 1980s when dancers began to incorporate turns in *danzón* dancing in Veracruz, by the 2010s most dancers in both *lírico* and *académico* styles opened out and turned during the final *montuno* section. *Académico* dancers did this much more frequently, however. From the 1980s, many dancers who at first danced *lírico* turned to the *académico* style so that they could participate in groups and because they considered the *académico* style more elegant. In the 2000s, I would estimate that around three-quarters of the dancers who frequented Veracruz's plazas performed some kind of *académico danzón*. People who learned to dance *danzón* after the 1980s tended to perform in the *académico* style, whatever their age. Of those dancing in the older *lírico* style, some had always danced *lírico*, while others had returned to it, having spent time in groups dancing *académico* and later leaving to dance independently (with or without regular dance partners). By the beginning of the 21st century, most of the oldest dancers were not in groups, although many had passed through them. So how do these dancing styles, music and age relate?

## Dance style, music and age

*Danzón* is often described as a 'difficult' dance, for *danzón* performance requires both choreographic knowledge and musical awareness. *Danzones* are in rondo form (e.g. AABAACAAD) and the A sections are considered 'non-danceable' (the *descansos* or rests): in Cuba couples walk and greet each other, while in Mexico they stand holding hands (usually for the first iteration of each A section). While connoisseurs can hear when these non-danceable *descansos* occur, novices continue dancing alone. These non-danceable moments make dancers' choreo-musical knowledge particularly visible, especially in the newer, codified *académico* style where a dancers' feet should come together on the final beat of (step and) section endings.<sup>6</sup> Another reason *danzón* is characterised as difficult is that there are hundreds of steps which can be learned, especially in the *académico* style where steps are combined (and sometimes



'invented') by groups to create dance 'routines'. In these routines, steps must both be physically achieved and large numbers remembered, sometimes in sequences of 28-plus per track (dance routine).

The codification of the dance, formation of dance groups and increased popularity of *danzón* from the 1980s had several impacts on the music. Firstly, the number of *danzoneras* (music ensembles) grew to fill the surge in demand. Secondly, some extant *danzoneras*, such as *Danzonera La Playa*, changed their performance practice in response to the codification of the dance. They clearly articulate the beginnings of phrases and sections so that *académico*-style dancers do not get lost. *Académico* dancers often prefer *danzones* that their four-bar steps 'fit' neatly into, *danzones* with eight-, 16- and 32-bar patterns which are uninterrupted by bridge passages (that, if unaccounted for, may de-synchronise the dancers' steps from the music). Other extant *danzoneras*, such as the *Danzonera Acerina*, however, carried on performing in the same way that they had for decades. *Danzonera La Playa* also released several recordings which were very similar to their live performances so that if dancers practised to these recordings, they would not be confounded when dancing to *La Playa* playing live.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, the majority of new and extant *danzoneras* continued to play a core repertoire (at least into the 2010s) that has changed little since the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> This is partly due to demand – dancers in groups becoming the main customers of *danzoneras*, and requesting a particular canon of *danzones* which are easier to perform and that are used for group dance routines. However, another reason for the stasis in the repertoire was that *danzonera* directors are now rarely composers (as they were until the 1950s), and instead anyone, with the resources to contract musicians and acquire an archive of scores (not an easy feat as these are generally unavailable in shops and must be obtained from other musicians or transcribed from recordings), a pair of *timbales* (small timpani), sound equipment, transport, and (ideally) a promotional recording, can set up a group and try to obtain gigs. Several dancers have done this, including Miguel Zamudio in Veracruz (with his *Danzonera Tres Generaciones* founded in 1999 to play with his younger dancers' group and at his annual festival) and Pablo Tapia who formed the *Danzonera Yucatán* in Mexico City in 2000. The stasis of the repertoire frustrates some musicians who seek breadth and innovation. The director of one *danzonera* complained to me that it was 'boring' playing the same pieces all the time, especially when he had a large repertoire to draw from. Many older *danzoneras* have repertoires penned by former directors (or frequently commissioned composers), but there is neither an urge to update these with new compositions and arrangements, nor a sense that certain compositions and arrangements are particularly valued for being 'old' or 'authentic'. Only occasionally are new *danzones* created, but these rarely update earlier compositional practices and sometimes even take older pieces as their theme (such as Aguilar Alcántara's recent arrangement of Lennon and McCartney's *Yesterday*). While *danzoneras* endeavour to create a musical identity for themselves as ensembles in terms of performance practice, and may re-arrange pieces in order to do this, temporality and notions of modernity are not factors in this process. However, if the repertoire played by *danzoneras* has changed little in the last few decades, the codification of *danzón* dancing has shifted the dynamics between *danzón* and age considerably.

There is tension between the demands of the newer, more codified *académico* style of dancing *danzón* and the older bodies of the majority of newcomers to the dance. Many people told me that it was easier for younger people to learn *danzón*

and dance routines as they are ‘young sponges’, unlike older people. The notion of the body as a sponge, as something that can absorb and be manipulated chimes with the late 18th-century European notion of the soldier’s body described by Foucault: while in the early 17th century, a soldier was expected to already have an appropriate ‘bodily rhetoric of honour’, by the late 18th century, the soldier’s body became something that could be disciplined ‘out of a formless clay’, something ‘docile’ that could become skilful and technically equipped for any demand (Foucault 1977, p. 135). In Veracruz, younger *danzón* dancers’ bodies were described as potentially malleable, capable of easily absorbing the technical demands of *académico danzón*. There was a sense that older bodies no longer had sponge-like capacities. However, there was no notion that older people were *unable* to dance *danzón*, or necessarily danced ‘worse’, as there is for example in professional ballet (see Wainwright and Turner 2006).

Age does not in itself (theoretically) determine whether *danzón* dancers are (considered) better or worse, but in Veracruz the exemplars of *académico danzón* are Miguel Zamudio’s group of younger dancers, *Tres Generaciones*. It is generally easier for younger people to dance in the more codified, disciplined *académico* style, and members of *Tres Generaciones* usually achieve a collective standard of performance considered extremely ‘elegant’ (an important marker of ‘good’ dancing). The excellence of this group is key to maintaining Miguel Zamudio’s reputation (both in the IVEC and in the national *danzón* scene). That said, *Tres Generaciones* rarely frequented local *danzón* events and merely represented Veracruz at Zamudio’s annual *danzón* festival, in his national competition and on occasional trips away. However *Tres Generaciones* were both the exemplars and the exception, due to their younger age, their highly codified style of *danzón* performance, their institutional grounding and their national profile. In Veracruz, a theoretically level playing field is set up for dancers of all ages in which an aesthetic of disciplined *académico danzón* has become increasingly valued, and in which younger people are emerging as ‘better’ dancers. In Mexico City, there are still a few older dancers who are considered excellent, such as Arturo Sánchez Rivera *El Capullo*, Miguel Ángel Cisneros *El Lagañoso* and Roberto Salazar *El Chale*, but these dancers have to some extent been superseded by a new generation of younger institutionally backed dancers such as Fredy Salazar and Maru Mosqueda. But what makes a dancer ‘good’?

The admired aesthetic in both the *lirico* and *académico* styles of *danzón*-dancing is ‘elegance’ and well-accented, ‘musical’ dancing. Musicality is often allied to *cadencia* (cadence/rhythmic movement). *Cadencia* involves the movement of the hips, a movement particularly associated with the circum-Caribbean. I was told (by *danzón* practitioners in Veracruz) that Veracruzanos had *cadencia*, where other Mexicans did not (a contestable point), because Veracruz and its people were ‘Caribbean’ (a notion which has been particularly promoted by Veracruz’s cultural institutions since the 1980s). Women from Veracruz were referred to in terms of racialised ‘decency’, reaping the benefits of being ‘a bit hot’, purportedly due to having some ‘black blood’ (as I explore elsewhere, Malcomson 2010b). A certain amount of sensuality is valued in *danzón* performance and, in addition to a model of the body as a sponge, there is (to a lesser extent) an ideal of embodied experience being brought to the dance. If *Tres Generaciones*’ younger, more disciplined *académico* style is one representation of Veracruz and its *danzón* (to the national *danzón* scene in particular), then the image of older people dancing provides another. It is the predominantly older people

who dance in the main square, in the *académico* and *lirico* styles, and who are the focus of Veracruz's tourist gaze.

### 'An old people's dance'?

Beyond Veracruz's culture industries, *danzón* is envisioned as an older people's dance in the broader Mexican popular imaginary. This imaginary is sustained by the large number of older dancers, but it is not a view shared by performers. Some younger dancers asserted that *danzón* was *un baile de viejitos* ('an old people's dance'), before promptly denying it and pointing to the number of younger practitioners. *Danzón* is and has been performed by people of various ages throughout its history, despite the preponderance of older practitioners in the last few decades. As we have seen, in Veracruz (and in Mexico City and beyond), younger people perform *danzón* and there are a few *danzón* groups dedicated to young people (and occasionally infants). Besides these groups, however, younger *danzón* dancers tend to be few and far between.

A second explanation as to why performers do not portray *danzón* as an age-related phenomenon is that *danzón* has never been a genre marketed solely towards particular age groups or youth cultures. *Danzón* was popular before the notion of 'youth cultures' gathered global momentum in the second half of the 20th century. Rather than being determined by biological age, 'youth' is a culturally specific and relational category, often allied to generation (and thus something that can be prolonged into mid-life and beyond). Literature on youth cultures (such as Ross and Rose 1994), and particularly subcultures (e.g. Hebdige 1979), provide ample illustrations of how music genres have acted as markers separating generations. Unlike the UK and the USA, where mid-century youth cultures tended to be associated with the lower classes, Zolov demonstrates how in Mexico it was the middle classes who initially took on the often defiant mores associated with youth. For example, rock 'n' roll (youth music par excellence in the USA) was merely another dance genre consumed by lower- and middle-class adults in Mexico City's dance halls, initially at least, only later becoming associated with urban youth (Zolov 1997, p. 201). One reason why Veracruz's practitioners are unwilling to categorise *danzón* by age, I suggest, is that *danzón* has no history of being a genre ranked in a hierarchy of generations. In Veracruz (as elsewhere), music-dance forms were separated to some extent by age in the 2000s: beyond family parties, *reggaeton*, for example, was associated with younger people, while *danzón* was linked to an older public. These age-related associations were often mapped onto venues (younger people tended to go clubbing, while older people danced in public open spaces), times of day (*danzón* events occurred early evening, while younger clubbers went out much later) and, more broadly, to understandings of younger (see Aguirre Aguilar 2008) and older people's amorous lives (see Malcomson 2010a).

Additionally, understandings of 'oldness' contributed to *danzón* not being considered an older person's music-dance form by habitués. We have here people aged between 50 and 80-plus being grouped together under the banner of 'old'. Age is contextual and relative, as is whether people deny or embrace 'oldness' (Kaufman 1986, p. 7; Thompson *et al.* 1990, p. 127). Few of the dancers I spoke to aspired to or relished becoming (or being) 'old'. The notion of being 'of the third age' circulated in Veracruz (as it does beyond), and some older dancers used this terminology. The

idea that 'aging equals decline' (Gullette 2004, p. 7) (as opposed to progress) was hegemonic in Veracruz (as it is in the UK, the USA and beyond). Younger dancers sometimes joked about the 'old' age of most *danzón* dancers, a joke shared with and told by older people. In addition to intergenerational ageism, in intragenerational settings, as Degnen (2007) found in the UK, older *danzón* dancers ascribed 'oldness' to others, either in jest, or where someone's social comportment and mental acuity were open to question. Rather than being biologically determined, or applied to the self, oldness was predominantly a (social) quality ascribed to others.

The older age of participants is used to justify the promotion of *danzón* to the young, and *danzón* events in Veracruz are not aimed at older people. Instead, these events provide a space for people of all ages to meet, dance, listen and watch a phenomenon associated with the city. *Danzón* is linked to cultural identity and tourism rather than older age or health care in Veracruz (both institutionally and in terms of *aficionados'* discourse). The wellbeing of even the oldest dancers is rarely mentioned in official discourses as a rationale for *danzón* events (either in terms of *danzón* being a form of sport or therapy). Nor is *danzón* included in municipal events targeted at older people. INAPAM, the National Institute of Senior Citizens, supports *danzón* events in towns throughout Mexico. INAPAM's predecessor, the INSEN (National Institute of Older Age), promoted a *danzón* group in the Port of Veracruz in the 1990s, but this was short lived. In the 2000s, the Port of Veracruz's INAPAM hosted many activities for older people, including dance workshops, but *danzón* was conspicuously absent. When older people dance *danzón* in Veracruz, they do so in plazas in front of tourists' cameras, rather than at the INAPAM. While some *danzón* habitués participate in other activities at the INAPAM, particularly women, other older *danzón* regulars steer clear of 'older people's' events, preferring events (such as *danzón*) which are not age specific.

## Conclusion

Understandings and discourses about age have tended to be instrumental to popular music in terms of production, promotion and consumption, and many studies of popular music have taken younger people, and especially youth cultures (past and present), as their centre of gravity. While some scholars (such as Zolov 1997) have analysed the relationships between age groups and emergent youth cultures, insufficient attention has been paid to music produced and consumed by older people in the present. Where the voices of older people have been considered, the focus has often been retrospective, that is on older people's experiences when young or their attitudes to contemporary youth cultures, rather than relationships between the temporal dimension of the life course and music. As the case of *danzón* in Veracruz illustrates, stereotypes that older people are resistant to novelty, change, creativity and possibility are ill-founded. Moreover, where age is used to justify rescuing 'cultural traditions', caution may be called for and analysis required to assess what lies behind such claims and why. As we have seen, the older age of the majority of Veracruz's *danzón* performers is evoked to 'authenticate' this 'tradition' and justify its 'rescue' and promotion by local culture industries. Yet, older people are not considered repositories of 'tradition' or sought out as 'authentic' practitioners. Instead, many older performers are new to *danzón*, often spending several decades dancing after they

begin in mid-life. Older people form the new generations and their age does not make this a fragile or dying practice.

## Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Mónica Moreno Figueroa, Henry Stobart, Cathrine Degnen, David Lehmann, Ciro Carlos Mizuno Gúzman, Margarita Castro Olvera, Dora Herrera de Cinta, Jan Fairley and the anonymous reviewers. Funding was kindly provided by the Arts & Humanities Research Council.

## Endnotes

1. Within the academy and beyond, 'tradition' has proved to be a multivalent concept, often suggesting stasis over several generations and frequently juxtaposed in binary fashion with 'modernity'. My concern here is *how* the notion of 'tradition' is employed as a vernacular term in relation to *danzón* in Veracruz, rather than broader issues of how popular music relates to notions of 'tradition'.
2. I conducted fieldwork in the Port of Veracruz, Mexico in 2006–2008 (with contextual fieldwork in Mexico City and Cuba) and have returned annually since. In this article, I refer to the Port of Veracruz as simply 'Veracruz', as is local practice. However, it should be noted that the Port of Veracruz is located in the State of Veracruz, of which the capital is Xalapa.
3. The term *danzonera* is both applied to a female *danzón* dancer (or aficionado) and to a music ensemble. Usually, the restrictive denomination *danzonera*, which probably emerged in Mexico City and Veracruz in the 1900s, is applied to the ensembles that specialise in *danzón*, not only in terms of repertoire and performance convention, but also instrumentation. By the beginning of the 21st century, *danzoneras* usually included two clarinets and/or one to four saxophones (usually alto and tenor), one to three trumpets, (valve or slide) trombone, electric keyboard, electric bass, *congas*, *güiro* and *claves*, *timbales* (two small timpani often 20 and 22 inches in diameter or the single-headed cylindrical metal *tarola* drums famously played by Tito Puente), and less commonly a baritone sax and additional trombone. In Mexico City, a bass drum is usually added to the *timbales*, while in Veracruz a cowbell (*cencerro*) is attached. *Danzón* is not a sung genre (bar a few exceptions such as *La Mora* by Eliseo Grenet which, when performed in Veracruz, includes a 12-bar sung passage in the final section). Veracruz's Municipal Band includes flutes, clarinets, saxophones, trumpets, trombones, sousaphone, *güiro*, clash cymbals, bass drum and *timbales*. Many *danzonera* musicians are sourced from Municipal, Naval or other military bands (where they sometimes continue to work).
4. *Son cubano* (also referred to as *son montuno*) is a Cuban genre which became popular in Cuba, Mexico and beyond in the 1920s. It is often performed by ensembles including vocals, *tres* (small guitar with three sets of double strings), guitar, bass, *bongos*, *congas* and *maracas* (see Moore 1997).
5. *Son jarocho* involves *zapateo* (stamping dancing) on a *tarima* (percussion platform) and ensembles often include one or more *jaranas* (small guitars of various sizes), a *requinto* (another small four-string guitar), a single-strung diatonic harp (without pedals), and the instrumentalists also sing (see Kohl S. 2007).
6. *Descansos* also occur in other music-dance forms such as the 19th-century *bolero español* (Galán 1983, pp. 189–90). Various myths abound in Mexico as to why *descansos* emerged in *danzón*: that dancers needed to rest and cool off after moving in the sultry heat of Veracruz (and Cuba, the 'birthplace' of *danzón*), or more plausibly the dictate of convention (in Mexico City's dance halls, for example, dancers stop for *descansos* when *danzones* are played by *danzoneras*, but not when they are played by other ensembles such as dance bands or *sonoras*).
7. To fit more tracks on records (LPs), older recordings of *danzones* often omitted all but the first A section of their rondo structure, becoming for example ABCD. Since the advent of CDs, and with the increased popularity of *danzón* dancing, recordings have tended to include the A sections of *danzones* throughout tracks (such as ABACAD). Veracruz's *Danzonera La Playa* also often repeat these A sections (e.g. ABAACAAD) in the style of their live performances.
8. Pieces in the 'core' *danzón* repertoire still performed in Mexico at the beginning of the 21st century include *Almendra* composed by Abelardo Valdés, *Cecilia* by Gilberto Guzmán Concha, *Isora Club* by Coralía López, Mozart's *La Flauta Mágica* arranged by Antonio María Romeu with Alfredo Brito, *Masacre* by Silvio Contreras Fernández, *Mi Consuelo es Amarte* by Leopoldo Olivares, *Mocambo* by Emilio Renté, *Nereidas* by Amador Dimas Pérez Torres, *Pulque para Dos* by

Gustavo Moreno, and *Teléfono de Larga Distancia*  
by Aniceto Díaz, to name but a few.

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