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The Guitar before Mexico and Flourishing Within It: A Brief Decolonial Approach

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Abstract: This article employs a decolonial lens to analyze the historical and sociocultural trajectory of the guitar in New Spain and Mexico, interrogating its role as both a colonial imposition and a symbol of national identity. It argues that the introduction of the guitar during Spanish colonization constituted a long-term act of cultural violence that displaced Indigenous musical traditions, reinforced Eurocentric hegemony, and facilitated the erasure of Indigenous expression. Through historical analysis, critique of Eurocentric music documentation, and examination of oral traditions (*refranes*), the study reveals how colonial hierarchies persisted after independence, mythologizing *mestizaje* as a unifying force while perpetuating processes of de-indigenization and paving the way for Indigenous developments in guitar traditions. The article applies Víctor Hernández Vaca's Ethnolutherie—a methodology centered on material culture and instrument-making—to recentralize marginalized narratives of the guitar's integration into diverse communities. The text underscores the guitar's dual legacy: its flourishing in Mexican folklore is intrinsically tied to colonial violence, even as its material and cultural development reflects Indigenous and *mestizo* agency. The conclusion calls for the decentering of Europe in music studies, greater recognition of colonial violence, and a reimagining of the guitar's place in Mexican identity beyond Eurocentric frameworks, attending to less explored perspectives. By articulating historical critique with decolonial analysis, this article challenges romanticized narratives of cultural fusion, urging recognition of the lasting impacts of colonialism and suggesting new, less-explored avenues for future research.

Keywords: decolonial studies. Mexican guitar. *mestizaje*. Ethnolutherie. Eurocentrism.

O violão antes do México e agora prosperando nele: uma breve abordagem decolonial

Resumo: Este artigo emprega uma lente decolonial para analisar a trajetória histórica e sociocultural do violão na Nova Espanha e no México, interrogando seu papel como imposição colonial e símbolo de identidade nacional. Argumenta-se que a introdução do violão durante a colonização espanhola constituiu um ato de violência cultural a longo prazo, que deslocou tradições musicais indígenas, reforçou a hegemonia eurocêntrica e facilitou o apagamento de expressões indígenas. Por meio de análise histórica, crítica à documentação musical eurocêntrica e exame de tradições orais (*refranes*), o estudo revela como as hierarquias coloniais persistiram após a independência, mitificando a mestiçagem como força unificadora, ao mesmo tempo que perpetuava processos de desindigenização e pavimentava o caminho para desenvolvimentos indígenas na tradição violonística. O trabalho inclui a proposta da Etnolutheria, desenvolvida por Víctor Hernández Vaca – uma metodologia que prioriza a cultura material e as práticas de construção de instrumentos – para recentralizar narrativas marginalizadas sobre a integração do violão em diversas comunidades. O texto ressalta o legado duplo do violão: seu florescimento no folclore mexicano está intrinsecamente ligado à violência colonial, embora seu desenvolvimento material e cultural reflita a agência indígena e mestiça. A conclusão defende a descentralização da Europa nos estudos musicais, a ampliação do reconhecimento da violência colonial e a reimaginação do lugar do violão na identidade mexicana para além de quadros eurocêntricos, atentando para perspectivas menos exploradas. Ao articular crítica histórica com análise decolonial, este trabalho desafia narrativas romantizadas de fusão cultural, exortando ao reconhecimento dos impactos duradouros do colonialismo e sugerindo alguns pontos de vista menos explorados para pesquisas futuras.

Palavras-chave: estudos decoloniais. violão mexicano. Mestiçagem. Etnolutheria. eurocentrismo.

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Mexico is the present destination of a colonial trajectory condensed into a national state. It inherits and develops a history of violence, dispossession, religious indoctrination, and music. Mexican history unfolds through a series of rapid transformations, triggered by the collision of worldviews and everyday understandings of life, identity and nationhood—all while a guitar sounds in the background. Mexico thus emerges as the culmination of diverse sociocultural and geopolitical processes that gave rise to a distinctive nationality and idiosyncrasy in the era of modern nation-states.

Within this territory, the lives and legacies of multiple Indigenous nations, *mestizo*[1] populations, and regions shaped by *criollo*[2] imaginaries formed a spontaneous cultural laboratory under forced conditions: the officially sanctioned foundation for coexistence and unity in a state situated on the American continent[3]. Among the myriad of phenomena taking place in what we now call Mexico, one particular object brought from Europe came into the skillful and virtuoso hands of many peoples, giving rise to a proliferation of music that was artisanal, creative, playful, and even industrial. The guitar has accompanied and harmonized Mexican history since colonial times—when Mexico itself did not yet exist. After centuries of interaction, its musics have fused with the very soundscape of *mexicanidad* [Mexicanness], permeating diverse aspects of sociocultural life.

Present in nearly all Mexican genres and ensembles, the guitar unites celebrations and practices—from serenades to fandangos—as an essential instrument for expressing a contested national identity. This identity, which emerged from the Neo-Hispanic project, that too often has been taken for granted, without sufficiently questioning either its "national" character or the possibilities of the instrument beyond the origins of particular pieces or composers.

This article explores the guitar in its encounter with the Neo-Hispanic sociocultural processes and with the subsequent Mexican national project, addressing questions of identity, place, history, and folklore from the perspective of a *mestizo* de-indigenized[4] researcher. Its aim is to broaden

[1] In this text, the term *mestizo* is used as the racial category that encapsulates the normative understanding of the Mexican national subject, constructed at the expense of historical violence against Indigenous nations. In the making of the modern Mexican national state, this category was not merely a possibility but an imposed position within a colonial project oriented toward European whiteness. *Mestizo* functions as an intermediate point in this trajectory: Indigenous enough to justify Mexico's existence as the inheritor of pre-Hispanic history, yet European enough to integrate the population into Western logics while denying sovereignty to Indigenous peoples. On the reality faced by Indigenous nations in Mexico, Yásnaya Elena Aguilar observes: "el nacionalismo mexicano es la narrativa que justifica la violencia racista que han padecido los pueblos indígenas de México" [Mexican nationalism is the narrative that justifies the racist violence suffered by the Indigenous peoples of Mexico] (2023, p. 38).

[2] The *criollo* phenomenon emerged from the search for and construction of an identity among European descendants born on the American continent. While European in cultural and ancestral terms, though not in geopolitical ones, this identity was actively differentiated from the *mestizo* category, which the *criollo* elite regarded as culturally and socially inferior. Their cultural compass was oriented toward achieving European hegemonic status without depending on Europe to validate their relevance. This situation eventually gave rise to independence struggles within the Spanish Empire, constituting a nationalist identity rooted in belonging to the American continent (Fregoso Génnis, 2005). The *criollo* identity sought to consolidate its differentiation and hegemony through multiple domains, including language (Hidalgo Martínez, 2018), literature (Parodi, 2009. Cabrera Pons, 2015), and music (Enríquez, 2009. Pérez Ruiz, 2014), among others. For this reason, the *criollo* concept should not be misunderstood as a synonym for *creole*.

[3] The concept of the American continent as a single geographical, political, and sociocultural entity—rooted in colonial history—remains the hegemonic understanding of the so-called "New World" among non-English-speaking countries of the continent. The implicit subdivision of the landmass into "the Americas" is not used in this text. As an alternative, some Indigenous perspectives propose the name *Abya-Yala* ["land in full maturity" in the Kuna language], whose use represents a decolonial intervention in naming practices (Juncosa, 1987. Del Valle Escalante, 2015. Duque Cardona; de Oliveira Silva, 2022).

[4] De-indigenization refers to the process that represented the acculturating, recognizing, and integrating Indigenous populations into the unified national identity project in Mexico (Stavenhagen, 2018. Ramírez González; Arriaga Ornelas, 2011). Initially grounded in a rigid biological conception of racial differentiation, the process shifted toward a sociocultural understanding, making it possible to classify Indigenous populations as *mestizo*— and therefore

the discussion of the Mexican guitar and to offer perspectives for analysis and further research through a brief decolonial examination of the historical and sociocultural context of what we now call Mexico and its connection to the guitar's social life within the platform of Mexicanness.

1. Music Colonization in New Spain and the Introduction of the Guitar

At first, the guitar in the New World was an object guarded by Europeans within a territory seized under colonial ambitions. Spanish contact with the inhabitants of the Caribbean was not the first European activity on the American continent (Kuitems *et al*., 2022), but it marked the beginning of the most devastating demographic catastrophe for Indigenous populations and the spread of slavery in the name of colonization (Newson, 2005. Aram; Obando Andrade, 2017). This encounter, which began at the end of the fifteenth century, created the conditions for an extension of European rule and influence over new overseas territories, with the aim of displacing, erasing, and subjugating native populations according to diverse interests in the Old World. In the midst of this violent confrontation, music was deployed on the European side as the hegemonic form of art, positioned above Indigenous expressions in a so-called "civilizing" effort. Within this framework, the guitar became a highly relevant element in the identity processes that would later unfold. Despite the apparently harmless nature of the object itself, its circulation was not the result of friendly exchange, spontaneous commerce, or neighborly interaction.

All elements introduced through colonization were imbued with a worldview, history, and logic distinct from the ongoing understandings of reality, meaning, and use held by the original inhabitants of the now-colonized territory. As with any other object—material or immaterial—the guitar was not an innocuous presence under these conditions. The domain of music was no exception. Even with all the positive contributions to *musicking* (Small, 2011) and the creation of a valuable repertoire for the enjoyment and practice of anyone with the interest and means to play or listen, the guitar nonetheless represented something foreign and invasive, accorded elevated status within the European worldview in this newly "discovered" territory. As a non-native element, with its tuning and playing systems governed by European normativity, the guitar was imposed over endemic musical traditions and meanings to serve diverse colonial purposes, including the construction of new hierarchies of music and the implementation of religious practice. Catholic doctrine, with its implications for music, was forced through violence and manipulation of Indigenous populations while simultaneously degrading native sacred and secular music practices (Turrent, 2018). In this first colonial contact, European conceptions of music—with their own rules and aesthetics—were presented as a univocal and newly "accessible" standard to non-Europeans, who were categorized under the anonymous and homogeneous label *Indio* [Indian] and, later, *Indígena* [Indigenous][5].

Mexican—under ideologies such as José Vasconcelos's notion of the "cosmic race" and the subsequent elevation of *mestizo* identity as a homogeneous national category (Montemayor González, 2022).

[5] The category *Indigenous* was formulated in the context of colonization—in all its different modalities—and in relation to the interactions among diverse populations and various nation-states that contain, repel, prosecute, or divide the sociocultural and material life of these groups. In the American continent, this designation has been described in various ways, one of the most widely cited being: *"La categoría de indio, en efecto, es una categoría supraétnica que no denota ningún contenido específico de los grupos que abarca, sino una particular relación entre ellos y otros sectores del sistema social global del que los indios forman parte"* [The category of Indian, in effect, is a supraethnic category that does not denote any specific content of the groups it encompasses, but rather a particular relationship between them and other sectors of the global social system of which Indians are a part] (Bonfil Batalla, 1972, p. 110).

During colonization, the clash between cultures and societies resulted in the irreparable loss of knowledge in general, and music in particular. This process was not an unavoidable aftermath, nor simply the logical consequence of non-European populations interacting with European institutions or adjusting to reconfigured social life. Rather, it was a complex dynamic, shaped by multiple elements entering into relations in different ways, whose outcome was a human tragedy driven by political interests across the Atlantic.

We have access to some documents from the period, written by religious figures (de Sahagún, 1577). These texts can aid in understanding Indigenous life prior to colonization through their interpretations of social and religious phenomena, detailed reports, and illustrations. Yet even when useful for Indigenous descendants, researchers, and the general public, their colonial origin cannot be ignored, with all the inclusions and omissions they entail. In every case, the documentation produced by European institutions and individuals represented Indigenous life as a way of making sense of populations that were being actively colonized or enlisted as allies in colonial domination.

Colonization entailed the massive loss of life and, in some cases, the disappearance of entire Indigenous civilizations (Maybury-Lewis, 2002) through war, disease, and de-indigenization, all in the service of gaining and retaining control over land and resources for European interests. The entry of the guitar into the new lands beyond the Atlantic was likewise a violent one, regardless of the apparent distance between the music practice and armed or institutional conflict. Introducing the guitar while upholding a hegemonic European status displaced other practices deemed inferior, even if that was not the original intent of disseminating musical instruments and knowledge. In the end, the guitar's very presence on Indigenous lands was itself part of colonization, following the principle that "no one colonizes innocently, and no one colonizes with impunity either" (Césaire, [1950] 2000, p. 39).

In the field of music, there is a sense of regret for the loss of knowledge and music originated by Indigenous peoples prior to colonization and during the Neo-Hispanic period: diverse groups and nations who were exterminated or de-indigenized in the construction of different geopolitical projects. This shift in social composition is not unique to New Spain and later Mexico, since similar processes of de-indigenization and the construction of the national subject occurred in various nation-states in Latin America (Montaña Mestizo, 2016. Rojas Reyes, 2015. Illicachi Guzñay, 2017), with devastating consequences for human groups that effectively lost their sovereignty and ways of life.

With regard to this social phenomenon, the process of de-indigenization should not be equated with the extermination of Indigenous peoples in a given territory. Rather, it should be understood as a process that prevents the full autonomous existence of those peoples in sovereign conditions and under their own cultural and social terms, driving them into assimilation within colonial projects through diverse mechanisms including education, political agreements, or violence. The de-indigenized person then retains Indigenous ancestry but is precluded from being Indigenous because of the pervasive influence of a nation-state that absorbs them and imposes national logic different from their own.

Considering the Neo-Hispanic national state history, this sense of cultural loss is ever present when one considers that the later Mexican national identity construct actively depends on Indigenous ancestry while, paradoxically, denying the conditions that would allow the remaining Indigenous populations in the country to thrive. In order to configure and sustain this national identity as an imagined community (Anderson, [1983] 2016), Indigenous pre-Hispanic music would still be invaluable for the Mexican *mestizo* and de-indigenized imagination since it represents the mandatory

starting point in the cosmogony of the current Mexican national imaginary. Yet there is no possibility of obtaining a legitimate representation or faithful sample of pre-Hispanic music from Indigenous nations. The supposedly pre-Hispanic musics presented today are musical constructions of the imagination of musicians and performers, rather than works of preservation and representation grounded in historical authenticity and accuracy.

Regarding Indigenous musical traditions before colonization, the work of figures such as Brother Pedro de Gante and Brother Bernardino de Sahagún in the sixteenth century has been criticized for their negligence in not documenting Indigenous musics as they truly were—even though they possessed the technical and theoretical knowledge to do so[6] or at least the intellectual toolkit to translate Indigenous musical phenomena into European music terms and transcription conventions. It is a fact that pre-Hispanic Indigenous musics are no longer accessible in their original forms from a historical perspective. Yet the musics of different Indigenous nations in the territory once called New Spain represent continuous traditions that remain present and thriving today despite the colonial processes they have endured.

In an interview (Loza, 1995), the Mexican composer Blas Galindo reflected on the historical regret stemming from the missionary work of Brother Pedro de Gante: "What is unacceptable is to forgive him for not leaving behind a single indigenous melody with his music training. Knowing about music, being a musician and teaching music, he had no interest in leaving us even a truly indigenous melody"[7] (p. 43).

Considering this commentary, we cannot truly know what the documentation of Indigenous music at that time would have looked like—or how distorted it would have been in relation to the original music—because of the strictures European notation systems. However, we can speculate about the form it might have taken, given the precedents and significant efforts in other domains. The case of the alphabetization of the *Náhuatl* language in Mexico (Díaz Rubio; Bustamante García, 1986) shows the likely path European settlers would have taken. In that case, religious figures adapted Indigenous linguistic phenomena into European forms and representations in order to make them accessible to European populations for colonial purposes. Indigenous resources and elements, perspectives, and worldviews were not at the center of that effort; rather the creation of texts was shaped to fit into an external society as a tool of domination. The Eurocentric approach, which did not account for Indigenous representation or tradition, ultimately altered the language itself and the scholarship surrounding it (Galarza, 1988. Hernández, 1998). In any case, the documentation of pre-Hispanic musics would likely have been conducted exclusively according to European standards, using only the European system of music and applying stylistic corrections.

In the same interview mentioned above (Loza, 1995), at a certain point, the Mexican composer Manuel Enríquez referred to Indigenous music as if it were synonymous with pre-Hispanic Indigenous music, likely because of the *mestizo* notion of Mexico as a national state and its tendency to relegate Indigenous life to the past or to geographically segregate it in remote areas no longer considered relevant to national life. Within this modern national state mindset, derogatory conceptions of

[6] Current discussions on ethical ethnomusicological approaches show the need to assess the researcher's responsibility in an ethnographic encounter (McDonald, 2021), and even the need to recognize and understand refusal in research (Tuck; Yang, 2014).

[7] Original quote by Blas Galindo in Spanish: "Lo que es inadmisible es perdonarle que con esa preparación musical no dejara escrita una sola melodía indígena. Sabiendo de música, siendo músico y enseñando música no tuvo ningún interés en legarnos siquiera una melodía realmente indígena" (Loza, 1995, p. 43).

Indigenous groups gave rise to a different form of violence in the cultural and artistic sphere whenever Indigenous identity was part of any expression. Historically, both inside and outside academic research, Indigenous populations have faced continuous tests of authenticity from external observers in order to be considered truly Indigenous (Mejía, 2013. García Valencia, 2013. Evans-Pritchard, 1987. Bendix, 1997).

On this point, and emphasizing the assumption that musical instruments are supposedly the only tangible legacy of Indigenous ancestors, Enríquez commented, "Some instruments, it is true, are very well made, but in reality, the central element—written music— does not exist. Everything that we call Indigenous music has been somewhat suggested or invented"[8] (Loza, 1995, p. 44). This remark reveals how the notion of authenticity in relation to Indigenous music continues to be measured by a European/non-European divide, rendering "inauthentic" any expression that does not conform to pre-Hispanic idealizations or other prejudiced Eurocentric expectations.

The understanding of indigeneity in music practices and instruments in New Spain is a contested terrain for current Westernized perspectives, particularly when considering appropriation, intervention, and transformational processes, which have resulted in varied expressions. This musical landscape includes the creation and consolidation of Indigenous string instruments, such as the *xaweri* and *kanari*, developed by Wixárika peoples from the *rabel* [violin] and guitar, their direct European ancestors (Álvarez Jacinto, 2017). The existence of these new instruments constitutes not merely the production and reproduction of a material object similar to the colonial model brought to New Spain, but a new object with a differentiated social life, performing style, and technical production that responds to an ever-changing context—including artistic and religious adornments, their choice of materials and resources, their factual availability, and their representation of extramusical practices (Warden, 2015) within the Indigenous community. While the Wixárika case can represent an adaptation of the colonial guitar into Indigenous life—resulting in the instrument known as the *kanari*—and, therefore, a contribution to the study of Mexican guitar, the debate over the national categorization of that process is a matter of decolonial concern. This concern arises from the sociocultural and geographical boundaries of the instrument, as well as from critique of ongoing cultural appropriation practices that continue to expand and consolidate Mexicanness through the incorporation of Indigenous elements extracted under conditions of internal colonization.

From a sociohistorical perspective, the *kanari* is undeniably a Wixárika guitar, and any argumentative effort to present it as Neo-Hispanic or Mexican would constitute a colonial enterprise that erases Indigenous lifeways in order to represent a colonial territory or the later national state—entities that did not contribute to the vitality of the musical tradition or to Indigenous lifeways more broadly across the territory. Historically, those entities have been foreign to the historical and sociocultural development of the *kanari*, as well as to its quotidian and sacred uses, and any such appropriation would disregard the sonic frontiers that define Indigenous ways of listening and the sonic political terrain of the Wixárika people (Luna Ruiz, 2024). In discussions about indigeneity—as opposed to the *criollo* colonial life of New Spain or the *mestizo* foundation of Mexicanness—Indigenous guitar traditions cannot be considered Neo-Hispanic or Mexican when they lack extensive dissemination and broad assimilation of practices, since such discursive claims to national character risk perpetuating cultural extractivism.

[8] Original quote by Manuel Enríquez in Spanish: "Algunos instrumentos, es cierto, muy logrados, pero en realidad lo central, música escrita, no existe. Todo lo que nosotros llamamos música indígena ha sido un poco sugerido o inventado" (Loza, 1995, p. 44).

Despite the adoption of objects and techniques, as well as the development of Indigenous musical traditions related to European instruments, the introduction of the guitar in New Spain was undeniably marked by colonial violence: it required the condition of subalternity[9] and resulted in the erasure—conceptual or factual—of pre-Hispanic Indigenous musics in favor of a new European beacon of music. The existence of the guitar in what was established as New Spain on the American continent was in no way separate from colonial violence, even if this was not as visible as direct armed conflict. Once the project of New Spain was underway, European influence, instruments, and musics took center stage in the formation of identity, relegating Indigenous instruments and musics to a secondary or even dispensable position within the sphere of music.

The contemporary adaptation of European string instruments—or derived instruments—within Indigenous musical traditions cannot be regarded as mere syncretism but must instead be seen as a colonial outcome within the musical landscape, one that displaced original Indigenous music-related objects and practices. The European preference for representation and preservation over other cultural expressions continues to shape museological practices in Mexican music (Ismael-Simental, 2020). Even though the territory already sustained diverse and complex cultural practices and musical development, the construction of a new society in the American continent selected the Old World as its blueprint in some areas—urban design, language instruction—and as an aspirational model in other areas—*sistema de castas*[10], political life, and cultural life.

The religious imposition of Spanish Catholicism was deeply tied to music (Mora; Ramírez, [1985] 2021. Sandoval Antúnez, 2013), and European-inspired, religiously influenced music institutions flourished in diverse forms across the continent, with mixed results regarding the inclusion of native populations in music practice under non-Indigenous standards and purposes (Barriga Monroy, 2006). Paintings and other visual representations of musical activity in New Spain before Mexican independence show the use of common European instruments, such as the guitar, and the participation of musicians from diverse *castas* as part of quotidian life in public secular spaces and in communal celebrations related to Christian traditions (Roubina, 2020).

At this stage, given the elitist preference for musical ensembles suited to ecclesiastical venues and themes, the guitar would be a musical element that remained in the background when thinking about identity in New Spain because of the European and *criollo* protagonism in elite notions of culture. This condition did not reflect the guitar's popularity among impoverished and politically disadvantaged *castas* (Cedeño Paredes, 2006), but rather the European-led imaginary of New Spain. Recurrent visual representations of *castas* in paintings and illustrations of the colonial period often depict guitar players, typically associated with the *mestizo* population and generally portrayed as strumming rather than plucking when playing popular music in secular spaces (Robles-Cahero, 2005). These depictions of *castas* also reveal the socioeconomic inequalities and racial hierarchy that privileged

[9] The condition of subalternity is commonly associated with postcolonialism (Spivak, 1994. Beverley, 1999). In its current application in Latin America, it usually refers to the power dynamics between states in the Global South/North framework. Here, the term is used to briefly explain the relationship between most Indigenous nations within the geopolitical boundaries of New Spain and the emerging European colonial project prior to Mexico's independent life.

[10] The hierarchical racial caste system that emerged in Latin America followed a different logic from the segregationist systems in other parts of the American continent. While whiteness has been examined as a phenomenological condition (Ahmed, 2007) often detached from situated experience, in Latin America it has functioned less as a genetically based division than as an attainable sociocultural and socioeconomic status, extending beyond physical features (Ceron-Anaya; de Santana Pinho; Ramos-Zayas, 2023).

Spanish individuals above all others in New Spain, reinforcing prejudicial stereotypes about appearance, attire, and even behavior among non-European populations, including enslaved peoples (Rubial García, 2002. O'Rourke Murolo, 2024).

During the viceregal period, the demand for guitar practice and the enthusiasm of musicians were well known and spread widely in dense urban centers—intergenerationally, across *castas*, and across socioeconomic classes. Because learning music did not depend exclusively on the affordability of explanatory texts or proficiency in reading, the dissemination of guitar skills faced no insurmountable barriers for Indigenous musicians who did not speak Spanish, making the instrument relatively accessible to non-European populations. The guitar was embedded in the dynamic social life of New Spain, and this social acceptance among the general public was also documented for other instruments with shared features. On the American continent, instruments such as the *vihuela*—a direct ancestor of the modern six-string guitar—enjoyed high esteem among musicians, and it still exists today, with modifications, as part of popular ensembles throughout Mexico and beyond.

Guitar-related instruments thrived within the colonial framework, though they predominantly reflected Hispanic over Indigenous presence in a Eurocentric relationship (Corona Alcalde, 1993). Domestic guitar-making began during this period, and the diffusion of guitar practice and selected compositions spread through both oral tradition and written documents (Díaz-Santana Garza, 2020). Instruction, through a variety of methods, educated new musicians from different social backgrounds, effectively integrating the guitar into local practice under European guidance and eventually fostering a musical identity of its own in New Spain.

Mestizaje was the concept that resulted from the multidimensional and multidirectional interaction between Indigenous, African, and European peoples in the American continent, generally shown as spontaneous and beneficial in official discourses but proven to have been extremely violent toward Indigenous and African populations in terms of extermination, subjugation, forced displacement, and enslavement, among several other issues. Some discussions on the matter have tried to expose *mestizaje* as a differential factor in favor of Spanish colonialism[11] when compared with other kinds of colonialism, as if a racial system of European origin could be seen as acceptable or, at least, more benign when considering other historical accounts in the American continent or other places around the world. The concept of *mestizaje* was initially intended as a description of social processes of recomposition in population dynamics, but in practice it never regarded all participants as equal. Each group was evaluated differently within a hierarchical framework, that systematically concealed the particularly violent historical process endured by the African population in the American continent—a demographic forcibly brought from another continent and enslaved in New Spain. The miscegenation that *mestizaje* represents conceived the Eurocentric path as something to be attained, while the Indigenous and African ancestry was viewed as degrading to European aspirations in social, cultural, and economic terms, even though a

[11] There is still a development of this discussion, especially in the comparison between Spanish and English colonialism, in order to be presented as one historically less harmful than the other. From the Spanish perspective, the accounts against the Spanish empire – some of them true with abundant evidence and some of them being just prejudices with no basis – are part of the *Leyenda negra* [Black Legend] and constitute a criticism that is received today by Spain (Sánchez Jiménez, 2015). On the other hand, the accounts that try to justify colonial violence and exonerate the Spanish empire's responsibilities with harmed and exterminated populations are part of the *Leyenda rosa* [Pink Legend] that promotes positive Spanish nationalist and pro-imperial views on diverse topics (Checa Beltrán, 2012. García Cárcel, [1992] 1998). In this matter, the less circulated opinions are still from Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant populations in the American continent.

certain degree of social mobility was possible (Gonzalbo, 1991. Apodaca-Valdez, 2021. Velázquez Gutiérrez, 2018). Therefore, although was presented as a feasible process, in reality, it was not promoted as a virtuous acquisition of diversity in society but rather as a model illustrating how socially degrading that process could be in relation to the European position at the top of the hierarchy. In music, the very notion of a place such as New Spain was bound to the dynamics of *mestizaje* within an oppressive racial system, conceived as a continuous route toward whiteness—a Eurocentric destination.

Mestizaje in music was neither egalitarian nor innocent or spontaneous. It entailed the forced relegation of people into a category of otherness, serving the interests of an external ruling system in both artistic practice and its assessment. Regardless of the interaction between Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, music dynamics developed within a colonial matrix of domination[12]. Even when contemporary studies of music in New Spain acknowledge contributions from *mestizo*, Indigenous, and African origins in terms of elements (Jurek-Nathan, 2011) or language (Cornelio Chaparro, 2011), those contributions were documented and performed under European religious and normative contexts. The dynamics of *mestizaje* implied the colonial hegemony of the European worldview, even from the *criollo* perspective[13], which later became an essential identity group in the struggle for independence. This cultural setting across the different latitudes of the Spanish empire in the New World established an unequal foundation for any musical contribution, collaboration, or appropriation within the *mestizaje* process and the representation of identity in New Spain, including guitar practice or compositions involving the instrument.

As Coriún Aharonián once explained, "the system will permanently try to achieve the predominance of the European over the subjugated, whether Indigenous or Black, or a mixture of these two—or, together or one by one, with the European itself"[14] (1994, p. 200). In other words, musical *mestizaje* established a mode of human interaction immersed in processes of music production, reproduction, learning, and assessment, with differentiated participants in asymmetric dynamics of discrimination. This process was not a voluntary or creative contribution but a situated phenomenon in a violent context, shaped by racialized considerations of culture and society that favored, first, Eurocentrism as a geopolitical and historical-theoretical reference and, second, whiteness as a sociocultural set of norms and aesthetic standards to be aspired to in the arts.

During the colonial period, the non-European population had access to the guitar in various forms. Guitar culture flourished through continuous creative efforts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century in New Spain, prior to Mexico's independent life. Most of the surviving original works available

[12] The perspective of colonial domination in the Latin American region as an issue that still affects the American continent has been theorized from different perspectives. In this regard, Aníbal Quijano commented "los pueblos conquistados y dominados fueron situados en una posición natural de inferioridad y, en consecuencia, también sus rasgos fenotípicos, así como sus descubrimientos mentales y culturales" [The conquered and dominated peoples were placed in a natural position of inferiority and, consequently, so were their phenotypic traits, as well as their mental and cultural discoveries] (2020, p. 864).

[13] Coloniality was established as an axis of rational thought and an ordering principle of life, with Europe positioned as both center and model. Aníbal Quijano addressed this issue in relation to rational knowledge: "el paradigma europeo de conocimiento racional no solamente fue elaborado en el contexto de, sino como parte de una estructura de poder que implicaba la dominación colonial europea sobre el resto del mundo" [The European paradigm of rational knowledge was not only developed in the context of, but as part of a power structure that entailed European colonial domination over the rest of the world] (1992, p. 16).

[14] Original quote by Coriún Aharonián in Spanish: "el sistema intentará permanentemente ese predominio de lo europeo sobre lo sometido, sea indígena o negro o mezcla de estos dos entre sí o – juntos o de a uno – con lo propio europeo" (1994, p. 200).

today were documented according to academic expectations. Some include guitar lessons and selected compositions aimed at formalizing the teaching of music through recommended European techniques and vocabulary. Yet the circulating repertoire was not isolated from the popular music that accompanied guitar practice outside academic settings. Instead, it fostered a dialogue between the academic and popular spheres that encouraged the development and diffusion of diverse genres. Popular musics performed both within and beyond urban centers were played on the guitar and related string instruments, such as *jarana*[15] and *vihuela* (Guzmán, 2010).

Indigenous populations participated actively in the music tradition of New Spain and contributed to the formation and development of important music centers in various areas. Over time, music of New Spain moved beyond the mere reproduction of European traditions and began to generate original works within its own schools of composers, incorporating Indigenous languages and diverse formulations such as the Neo-Hispanic polyphony (Stevenson, 1952). Regional dynamics of music positioned Mexico City, Jalisco, Puebla, Veracruz, and Michoacán as some of the most prolific centers for the performance of European legacy music, official commissions for religious compositions destined for sacred venues, and the creation of original works on various themes. Although research on Neo-Hispanic music has relied heavily on academic and Catholic sources due to the preservation of documents and testimonies, secular music was neither uncommon nor separate from ecclesiastic venues. Indeed, religious celebrations in the Christian calendar often involved broad societal participation in extra-ecclesiastical spaces as continuations of Catholic traditions, and popular dances and music proliferated organically (Hurtado Giménez, 2024). Even in contemporary accounts that illustrate the extension of secular practice within Neo-Hispanic music, the *fandango*[16] tradition across the Mexico territory is still played using *jarana*, *vihuela*, guitar and other string instruments such as the harp and fiddle (Zamora; Castro, 2011).

Sharing music documents in New Spain reflected European predominance, even when they were produced on the American continent. By its very nature, the *mestizaje* process in New Spain required a non-egalitarian configuration in order to develop an identity rooted in colonial foundations. To justify the condition of subalternity, even the *criollo* population and Europeans who had settled in the Americas assumed a secondary place in cultural terms, accepting European origin and hegemony as the measure of quality and artistry in music. In this context, historical documents regarding the guitar show New Spain as a site of music publication, despite their reliance on originally European text.

A milestone in Neo-Hispanic guitar culture is the publication of *Explicación para tocar la guitarra*[17] by Juan Antonio de Vargas y Guzmán ([1776] 1986). This manuscript was later partially republished in the Mexican journal *Heterofonía* in Mexico. In the publicly available introductory chapter (de Vargas y Guzmán, [1776] 1989), the author emphasizes the need for improved technique among

[15] The *jarana* is a string instrument, very popular alongside the guitar in traditional music ensembles associated with popular genres such as *son jarocho* (García Méndez, 2022). It is a direct successor of the *vihuela* and forms part of the development of Mexican lutherie in Veracruz. The *jarana* can be considered one of the guitar's descendants of Neo-Hispanic and Mexican origin (Guzmán *et al*., 2016).

[16] *Fandango* celebrations are popular social gatherings that combine dance, songs, instrumental music, and communal enjoyment, generally accompanied by string instruments such as the guitar and its relatives (Jáuregui, 2014). These gatherings are defined more by their social and festive character than by a strict connection to the *fandango* music genre of Spain. Their rural character and the multiplicity of music genres performed have been documented in various regions of Mexico (Ochoa Serrano, [1994] 2000).

[17] The full title of that work is *Explicación para tocar la guitarra de punteado por música o cifra, y reglas útiles para acompañar con ella la parte del bajo,* which may be translated as *Guide for Playing the Guitar in the Plucked Style Using Staff Notation or Tablature, and Practical Rules for Accompanying the Bass Part with It*.

guitarists and the importance of a dedicated instructional book for the instrument, similar to those that already existed for others. The text was designed for guitar enthusiasts, regardless of their virtuosity or theoretical knowledge, with the intention of providing an accessible and valuable resource. The significance of these early considerations for the re-exploration of Neo-Hispanic identity opened new paths for assessing the cultural role and status of places like Veracruz (Corona Alcalde, 2004) and, by extension, New Spain as a whole—even though such evaluations would later be partially contested in light of other evidence regarding the historical text (Vazquez Zerecero, 2015. Avilez García, 2020).

At first, *Explicación para tocar la guitarra* was believed to have been published originally in New Spain. This gave rise to a series of considerations among researchers about the development of music instruction treatises for the most popular instrument in Mexico. Despite its initial status as a remarkable eighteenth-century Neo-Hispanic source, European music standards and hierarchies remained the dominant measure for evaluating the text and its author favorably. Robert Stevenson was the first researcher to write in a Mexican journal about the manuscript. He reported that the Newberry Library in Chicago held the text and confirmed that Isabel Pope Conant made it publicly known on November 2, 1974. Stevenson offered his thoughts in a brief descriptive note: "The author shows himself to be thorough, not only when dealing with practical problems [...] but also as an endless connoisseur of the best European authorities"[18] (1975, p. 15).

The supposed Neo-Hispanic origin of the text prompted a reconsideration of questions surrounding music production in New Spain, particularly in light of its date and its alleged provincial, rather than metropolitan context. Scholars interpreted this information as a clue about guitar and sociocultural life in New Spain from a regionalist perspective. Juan José Escorsa and José Antonio Robles-Cahero emphasized these points when they declared that the possibility of the book having been written in Veracruz around 1776 rather than in Spain "is something that deserves to be highlighted, since we would hardly find in the aforementioned chain another treatise composed in such an exhaustive and methodical way"[19] (1984, p. 6).

Later, Ángel Medina (1989) confirmed the discovery of a prior version of the guitar method by Juan Antonio de Vargas y Guzmán, written in Cádiz in 1773. That text was re-examined and republished (de Vargas y Guzmán, [1773] 1994), reestablishing Europe as the starting point for considering academic texts on the guitar in New Spain. This important event in the music historiography of the guitar reflected the complex negotiations between the Neo-Hispanic project and its confrontations with European hegemony in the academic study of music. It also provided an indication of the later reconsideration and flourishing of guitar development in the Americas, when academic—hence European-ruled—notions of the guitar were no longer at the center of the discussion and research.

A critical notion to consider in research on Neo-Hispanic and Mexican music, particularly regarding cultural scope, is the need to decenter Europe as the framework of analysis or as the measure of difference. The search for identity in music—when examined through the lens of the colonial histories of various territories—is a failed enterprise if its relevance or authenticity depends on assessing how a

[18] Original quote by Robert Stevenson in Spanish: "El autor se muestra acucioso, no solamente tratándose de problemas prácticos [...] sino como un conocedor sin fin de las mejores autoridades europeas" (1975, p. 15).

[19] Original quote by Juan José Escorsa and José Antonio Robles-Cahero in Spanish about *Explicación para tocar guitarra* being written in Veracruz in 1776: "es algo que merece ser destacado, ya que difícilmente encontraríamos en la cadena antes aludida otro tratado compuesto en forma tan exhaustiva como metódica" (1984, p. 6).

society, or merely its elite, responds to an external paradigm and how different or original its creations appear in relation to an imposed model.

Although all existing documentation about the guitar in New Spain and its study is indispensable, academic research has relied heavily on written sources grounded in Eurocentric perspectives, without directly addressing how the interaction among populations and cultural elements resulted in the factual accommodation to an alien structure in most texts. For instance, Catholic chants in *Náhuatl* produced during this period testify to forced indoctrination, weaponizing an Indigenous language for European religious purposes that were neither consensual nor aligned with the original desires, lifeways, and worldviews of diverse native populations. Presenting such materials merely as contributions to Neo-Hispanic music obscures the sociocultural conditions that produced the forced acceptance of new hierarchical paradigms.

This persistent dimension of violence is always present in those compositions and documents. Yet, it is rarely treated as central in analyses of music in New Spain, perhaps because colonialism is often understood as something belonging to the past—as if it were a concluded event in history. In general, these processes have been described simply as syncretism, without questioning the underlying context of European domination. Both syncretism and *mestizaje* have served as discursive tools for evading critical academic analyses of the effects of colonization on subjugated populations, in favor of constructing identity narratives within Neo-Hispanic and Mexican musical imaginaries.

How syncretic can a historical process truly be if people from different sociocultural backgrounds are compelled to participate under the social dynamics and evaluative frameworks imposed by external powers in a new territory? How does the asymmetry of power in this system shape or constrain the preservation and valuation of non-European people and cultures in their position of subalternity?

To approach these questions, one possible answer lies in adopting a gaze that decenters Europe as both model and measure—a gaze that places people first, regardless of their compliance with colonial norms. Decentering Europe may thus represent the first step toward rediscovering the Neo-Hispanic and later Mexican guitar. This endeavor entails not seeking to escape from the violent realities of colonization, but instead interrogating positions and phenomena, rather than treating texts and data as a taken-for-granted context shaped by expected Eurocentric normalcy.

2. The Mexican Guitar and Identity

The construction of the Mexican project, once the new political entity gained independence after an armed struggle in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, inherited and developed the particularities of New Spain. In sociocultural dynamics in general, and in music in particular, Mexico continued to reexplore and expand much of the logic implemented during colonial rule. The construction of Mexican idiosyncrasy was marked by racial and class-based distinctions developed in New Spain through the *sistema de castas*, now reinforced by and an anti-Spain sentiment and a *criollo* leadership that sought to assert a local identity distinguishing itself from mere European descent.

The complex relationship of *criollo* populations with Spanish rule across the Atlantic—even with their sociocultural privileges within the *castas*—was a direct precursor to the struggles for independence, as several documents attest (Fernández Cantero, 2019). This paradoxical situation did not

decenter the European blueprint in its trajectory towards Westernization. Instead, it led to a localized adaptation of European understandings of the nation-state.

Independence in Mexico required a reconsideration of the New World as a point of departure, acknowledging certain problems embedded within the European paradigm—such as slavery and hierarchical distinctions among human beings as part of the *castas*—without questioning the underlying logic of subalternity, dispossession, religious indoctrination, and de-indigenization of social life. In Mexico, the notion of locality in the formation of a new national entity was at first not connected to pre-Hispanic history, but rather to a sense of nativeness derived from being born on the American continent. The *americano*[20] category functioned as a concept that bypassed *criollo*, *mestizo*, Indigenous, or Afro-descendant designations—a history-erasing term that neither denied its European roots nor accepted subordination to Europe. The *americano* concept was significant in the development of Mexican independence discourses advanced by José María Morelos y Pavón (Fernández Delgado, 2013), though it ultimately failed to prevail in the later formation of Mexican identity.

The colonial nature of Mexico, in its various historical configurations as an empire or a republic, persisted even without Spain as its colonial enabler. From independence onward, the growing body of texts—both written and oral—revealed multiple forms of negotiation among different social categories, yet without dismantling the European models that remained central to social relations. The emergence of a national paremiology[21], reflected in *refranes*[22] from New Spain through independent Mexico, offers insight into the persistence of prejudices rooted in the *sistema de castas*. These would later be reframed through the concept of *mestizaje*[23] presented as a means of legitimizing unity in the new national state. Words such as *indio*[24], *gachupín*[25], *criollo*, and *mestizo* appear in that oral folk tradition, reproducing harmful racial stereotypes against those social categories in Mexican *refranes* (Rodríguez Valle, 2005).

Oral tradition also portrays the relationship between national identity, gender, music, and the guitar through different *refranes* that reinforce social stereotypes—especially those tied to gender dynamics grounded in colonial gender binarism[26]. In some collections, guitar playing is described as a masculine activity in which the instrument itself becomes a metaphor for the objectification of women in

[20] This concept is still used among different conceptualizations of belonging to the American continent. Its implicit demonymic use in the term "Latin American" is widespread, and the plain use of *americano* is sometimes named in music as a contestation against imperialism, racism and xenophobia from the US (Los Tigres del Norte, 2001).

[21] This subfield in Folklore studies the nature of proverbs and its relations to folkways and moral teachings in diverse populations. Under this lens, proverbs are used "to withdraw to the safety of collective experience" (Hakamies, 2016, p. 314) when facing problematic situations.

[22] Mexican (Pérez Martínez, 1987) and Hispanic-American (Arora, 2000) perspectives on proverbs use the term *refrán* as an ethnic genre (Ben-Amos, 1976). This genre is understood in Folklore as a part of traditional literature (Pérez Martínez, 1996, p. 85).

[23] Even when the concept of *mestizaje* was used in New Spain as part of *sistema de castas*, the concept acquired a different use and understanding in the formation of Mexican national identity. The condition of whiteness as achievable was more flexible progressively to the twentieth century, including Indigenous ancestry as a kind of mere decorative element of national identity (Navarrete Linares, 2022, p. 136). The most pervasive ideology regarding the *mestizaje* process as definitory for national identity appeared in 1920's post-revolutionary Mexico "where progressive elites designed and promoted 'the cosmic race'" (Telles; Bailey, 2013, p. 1564). *Mestizaje*, when applied in Mexico as the regulating principle in the construction of national identity, resulted in a negative effect on the representation of the Indigenous population (Zermeño, 2011, p. 285).

[24] A pejorative term for Indigenous people.

[25] A pejorative term for Spanish people.

[26] Colonial gender dynamics across the American continent differ from the variety of forms within Indigenous nations and Afro-Descendant peoples. Most of the gender dynamics introduced during colonization remained in the colonized territories and developed themselves according to each situated context (Connell, 2014).

heteronormative contexts, "because of the way he holds it to play"[27] (Rodríguez Valle, 2010, p. 41). Misogynistic *refranes* have equated guitars and women as forms of property, implying that men possess access to both through routine physical contact—touching women and playing the guitar[28] (Pérez Martínez, 2004, p. 316).

Other *refranes* about the guitar continue to depict men as the normative subject but attribute to them certain virtues—technical mastery, adaptability to different settings, and the capacity to overcome adverse circumstances through talent: "he who is a good musician can play even with one string"[29] (Pérez Martínez, 2004, p. 324). Oral tradition, when used as an alternative for studying the Mexican national identity construction process and the social life of the guitar in the popular imaginary, represents an additional resource that is generally not directly or irreparably filtered by academic considerations and, therefore, contributes to efforts to decenter European prevalence in certain aspects of the processes of discovery, documentation, rereading, and analysis.

Another significant approach to the Mexican guitar that, in certain respects, decenters Europe has long been overlooked in studies of national identity. When considered from the perspective of material culture[30], the study of the guitar as an object opens the possibility of situating it within a national context rather than linking it exclusively to the European academic tradition. Because of the Eurocentric codification of guitar playing that was taught and reproduced in New Spain, the colonial constraints on the social life of the guitar were initially tied to originality and artistry, both of which were evaluated according to a preestablished framework and system of assessment. However, approaching the instrument through the lens of material culture provides greater scope for understanding what is *Mexican* about the guitar—beyond the expectations of academic music discourse. People in New Spain and Mexico first encountered the guitar as an alien artifact from Europe, but over time it became something of their own: an instrument designed, crafted, and diversified through the labor of individuals across the *sistema de castas*. In its material dimension, the guitar transformed daily life in multiple ways, influencing regional economies from the establishment of New Spain to modern Mexico.

Historically, the guitar as an object has been associated with artisanal production, even though industrial models now exist. The hands that shaped the guitar were engaged not only in *musicking* but also in the making of an object from local materials, guided by inherited expertise. Once the European blueprint was introduced, the material processes of producing and reproducing the conditions for guitar playing evolved beyond the mere replication of Spanish models toward autonomous responses that met local needs and fostered innovation.

[27] As a gendered language, the word guitar [*guitarra*] in Spanish is feminine, as well as the word woman [*mujer*]. The original quote in Spanish, "por la forma en que se abraza para tocarla" (Rodríguez Valle, 2010, p. 41), presents a double entendre that could be translated as "because of the way he holds her to touch her [sexually]." My in-text translation presents the reading that fits better with the guitar context as a plain music activity.

[28] The original *refrán* is "la mujer y la guitarra, son de quien las toca" (Pérez Martínez, 2004, p. 316). In this case the verb *tocar* in Spanish means "to touch [sexually or not]" and also "to play [an instrument]". A possible translation keeping elements, structure, and meaning in context could be "the woman and the guitar belong to the man who touches/plays them".

[29] The original *refrán* is "el que es buen músico, con una cuerda toca" (Pérez Martínez, 2004, p. 324). My in-text translation adds the implicit notion of not having the most favourable context at playing.

[30] As defined by Henry Glassie, material culture is understood in this text as "the way we imagine a distinction between nature and culture, and then rebuild nature to our desire, shaping, reshaping, and arranging things during life" (1999, p. 1).

The folklife of a region reveals detailed information about the relationships among people, material culture, and place. In relation to the spaces where communities develop lifeways of their own, material folklife expresses "the deep understanding and intimate knowledge that people have of their physical environs" (Ryden, 1993, p. 73). Michoacán, for example, developed a vibrant culture of composition—both sacred and secular—for the guitar, while also forging a material bond between instrument and place.

Probably owing to the centralist orientation in the construction of Mexican national identity, Michoacán has often been regarded as a minor region compared to Mexico City, Jalisco, or Nuevo León. Yet its importance in the continuation of guitar practice and in the formation of ensembles featuring the guitar and related instruments is arguably among the greatest when viewed from a national perspective on chordophones. Michoacán is commonly associated with guitar making and with a vibrant Indigenous presence (Pareyón, 2007). Research on the region has often emphasized folkloristic assessments of both popular and academic expressions of music.

The guitar in Michoacán, as part of Mexican folklore, has been documented both in its modern six-string form and in the seven-course configuration (Campos, [1928] 1991). Everyday life in many parts of the state is linked to the P'urhépecha nation, an Indigenous people who adopted the guitar as part of their sociocultural life and integrated it into their traditions (Hurtado, 1959). Linguistic studies related to music have traced expressions in the P'urhépecha language that reflect the connection between singing and guitar playing. Among these[31] are *pirékutarhani* and *pirékutatarhani*, meaning "you bring a guitar, and I will sing with it," used in the Ahuiran and Paracho areas of Michoacán (Nava López, 1993, p. 428).

Paracho, in particular, is the site most closely associated with guitars in Michoacán. Historical documents describe it as a major Mexican center for guitar production (Ángeles Villanueva, 2021), and it has even been called "the world capital of the guitar" because of its artisanal and industrial output in this P'urhépecha territory (Hernández Vaca, 2007, p. 65). Although the guitar—as a musical object crafted by skilled Indigenous, Neo-Hispanic, and later Mexican artisans—found a lasting historical, economic, and cultural home in Paracho, the link between Michoacán and the guitar as material culture was significantly altered by the rise of industrialization and migratory movements. As Alejandro Martínez de la Rosa observes, "the almost total disappearance of its endemic musical instruments—the guitars *túa*, *tenor*, *sétima*, *armonía*, or *sirincho*—took place with the industrial manufacture of six-string guitars from 1930 onwards"[32] (2021, p. 219). The study of the Mexican guitar in relation to place, as a material culture of Michoacán, offers an important opportunity to reexamine the formation of national identity through the guitar—extending beyond *musicking* itself.

[31] The original translations are in Spanish and offer different meanings according to *P'urhépecha* informants in different areas of Michoacán (Nava López, 1993, p. 428). According to the region, each expression can present a different meaning. My in-text selections show those ones with the same meaning in the same region that includes the explicit reference to the guitar. Here is the original text with the full name of areas instead of an abbreviation:

- *pirékutarhani*: "tú traes una guitarra y con ella voy a cantar" [Ahuiran, Paracho]; "llevas a un joven para que les cante una canción" [Tiríndaro, Zacapu].

- *pirékutatarhani*: "lleva a alguien para que cante" [Tiríndaro, Zacapu]; "tú traes una guitarra y con ella voy a cantar" [Ahuiran, Paracho].

[32] Original quote by Alejandro Martínez de la Rosa in Spanish about Paracho: "se produjo la casi total desaparición de sus instrumentos musicales endémicos —las guitarras túa, tenor, sétima, la armonía o el sirincho—, al maquilar industrialmente guitarras sextas a partir de 1930" (2021, p. 219).

Continuing with an examination of decolonial perspectives on the Mexican guitar, the relationship between the object and the people who produce it reveals the intricacies of the guitar as a human-made artifact with a cultural life of its own, one that responds to a situated sociocultural context. Approaching the cultural life of the guitar in the same way that scholars study other objects demonstrates how "they do not belong to some sort of material outside but are one of the mediums through which practices, meaning, and cognitive processes are made possible and come into being in specific ways" (Benzecry; Domínguez Rubio, 2018, p. 327).

Some proposals in organology seek to move beyond mere classification, suggesting instead a holistic reconsideration of instruments within their specific contexts of study—one that includes multidimensional analysis, extending from politics to religion and encompassing interdisciplinary examinations of these objects across fields ranging from music to medicine (Zenker, 2017, p. 58). In the Mexican case, recent scholarship has sought to develop a new subfield through which the guitar might be rethought without relying on written music. Ethnolutherie[33], formulated by Víctor Hernández Vaca, is defined as "the interpretation of the culture from the ethnographic, historical, iconographic, corporeal, and symbolic observation of the practice of making musical instruments and of the musical instrument itself"[34] (2010, p. 266).

In subsequent reflections on this proposal, space was opened for decolonial inquiry, given the persistent background of *mestizaje* and de-indigenization processes in Mexican history. When colonization is understood as an ongoing process, Indigenous perspectives cannot be conflated with a singular Mexican standpoint; rather, they should be recognized as distinct national positions encompassed within Mexico's colonial project. From this view, Ethnolutherie offers a framework for studying instruments as sociocultural entities developed by Indigenous societies that do not necessarily represent the *mestizo* Mexicanness.

In this regard, Hernández Vaca underscores the relevance of Ethnolutherie in traditional systems where "instruments fulfill meta-musical functions, making such instruments not simply inanimate material objects, but considered animate spiritual beings and invested with complex meanings by the culture in which they participate"[35] (2020 p. 171). Thus, Ethnolutherie constitutes a valuable proposal for broadening the understanding of the Mexican guitar—embracing both its material and human dimensions—through dialogue with the diverse nations and cultures within Mexico in a dynamic that can question at any time the given condition of Mexicanness in each case. Such a stance opens a broad field for critiquing the colonial legacy embedded in the sociocultural dynamics of music and in the construction of a unified national identity. The implementation of Ethnolutherie in research is already taking place beyond Mexico (Martínez; Trujillo, 2025) even as the consolidation of this field remains a work in progress. From this perspective—both within and beyond music—the construction of Mexicanness can be

[33] The original term in Spanish is etnolaudería.

[34] Original quote by Víctor Hernández Vaca in Spanish: "la interpretación de la cultura a partir de la observación etnográfica, histórica, iconográfica, corporal, simbólica, de la práctica de construir instrumentos musicales y del propio instrumento musical" (2010, p. 266).

[35] Original quote by Víctor Hernández Vaca in Spanish with respect to instruments in traditional systems: "los instrumentos cumplen funciones metamusicales, haciendo que dichos instrumentos no sean simplemente objetos materiales inanimados, sino que sean considerados seres espirituales animados y sean revestidos de complejos significados por la cultura en la que participan" (2020, p. 171).

understood as having developed at the expense of the de-indigenization of social life and the denial of sovereignty to Indigenous nations in the successor to New Spain, the national state of Mexico.

Finally, another perspective on the Mexican guitar emerges in the history of various popular guitars that have forged close relationships with both people and the popular and traditional genres they accompany. One that achieved wide acceptance from the eighteenth century through the early twentieth was the seven-course guitar—known as the *guitarra séptima*[36] or *guitarra sétima*—which evolved from the five-string guitar (Valencia, 2010, p. 79–80). In the Mexican Sotavento region, encompassing the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Tabasco, the *guitarra de son* represents a family of guitars of different registers, shapes, and sizes, primarily used in *son jarocho* ensembles (García Ranz, 2010). The g*uitarra de golpe* is also part of Mexican lutherie in Michoacán (Martínez de la Rosa *et al*., 2005), where it commonly accompanies other guitar-like instruments in *mariachi* ensembles, such as *vihuela* and *guitarrón*[37] (Villicaña Torres, 2024). Another guitar from the Michoacán region, the *guitarra panzona*, which, according to some reports, has almost disappeared, along with the techniques once used in its construction (Anastasio, 2005).

The hegemonic presence of the six-string guitar is evident across Mexican musical traditions, where it represents a fundamental element in a wide range of genres and ensembles. The instrument has long been recognized for its deep emotional resonance and association with national identity among Mexican audiences and performers: "The guitar is an essential part of Mexican music as it is one of the instruments with the greatest tradition in our country and with which many people feel a close connection"[38] (Salcedo Moncada; López Prado, 2017, p. 13). Its enduring popularity is linked to its everyday presence in diverse traditions, including *mariachi*, which remains the musical symbol of Mexico (Jáuregui, 2007).

Conclusion

The Mexican guitar has a long and rich history of multiplicity and virtuosity. It has been the chosen instrument for beautiful musical works that have travelled the world with remarkable success. In all its variations, the Mexican guitar offers a glimpse into elements of national identity in music and stands as an indispensable element of Mexicanness.

Yet the introduction of the guitar in Mexico began as an act of violence during the colonization of New Spain and continued along a colonial trajectory through independent Mexico. The instrument participated in Eurocentric musical practices that ultimately displaced other cultural expressions of non-European populations. Both Neo-Hispanic and Mexican guitars contributed to the consolidation of a music system assessed according to standards generated across the Atlantic.

This brief decolonial approach seeks to recognize all these circumstances simultaneously, while highlighting the social dynamics involved in the intertwined histories of music and guitar in the

[36] The most popular period of this guitar was shared by New Spain and the independent Mexico in the nineteenth century (Fernández, 1880). The seven-course configuration allowed up to 14 strings (Valencia, 2010).

[37] The *guitarrón mexicano* is used mainly in mariachi ensembles. The instrument is an acoustic bass made for the plucking technique that resembles a big guitar (Stanfield Prichard, 2020).

[38] Original quote in Spanish: "la guitarra forma parte esencial de la música mexicana al ser uno de los instrumentos de mayor tradición en nuestro país y con el que muchas personas se sienten cercanas" (Salcedo Moncada; López Prado, 2017, p. 13).

territory we now call Mexico. From the *sistema de castas* to *mestizaje* and de-indigenization, all Mexican guitars have thrived at the expense of other instruments, musics, belief systems, and cultural legacies of nations that were native, enslaved, or both on the American continent.

At the same time, Mexican guitars have flourished thanks to the essential participation of people from different eras, regions, and origins—musicking, crafting as artisans, manufacturing in industry, investing new instruments, and integrating all variations of the guitar into their daily lives as the sound that resonates at the forefront of their existence.

Perspectives that decenter Europe in the understanding and study of the Mexican guitar can take many forms. Consulting and researching oral tradition related to music, examining the guitar as part of material culture and place in key areas among diverse populations, and adopting Ethnoluthierie as an approach to studying all Mexican guitars—each shaped by complex and continuous sociocultural processes over centuries—are just some of the many possibilities for research within the vast space the guitar occupies beyond the written score.

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