I began the research for this book soon after moving to North Carolina in 2003. Originally, I planned to write a book on the history of the mambo and its social and cultural significance in various parts of the Americas. Starting my research with materials published and produced in the United States, I was struck by the prevalence of the notions “primitive,” “savage,” and “Africa” in describing mambo and related styles of music, including Afro-Cuban music. I had encountered similar terms in some of the Cuban materials I used for my research on Arsenio Rodríguez. I soon shifted my focus to researching the epistemological nature of these terms, primarily in anthropological thought of the 1940s in the United States, which led me to the work of Melville J. Herskovits and his archival collections at Northwestern University and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. From that point forward, I followed many of the direct connections Herskovits had made during his acculturation and New World Negro research, and the project shifted focus accordingly from the mambo to an epistemological study on these and related notions as understood and used not only by academics but also by musicians, dancers, and others as well.

The need I felt to understand the prevalence of the notions “primitive,” “savage,” and “Africa” in public discourse of the 1930s through the 1950s was indeed great. I wanted to write a book that explained why these notions were so prevalent in public discourse including but not limited to academia. My interests in this problem, however, extended beyond my research to include specific experiences I had throughout much of my own academic life. During a personal trip to visit my extended family in Quito, Ecuador, in 1996, I decided to wander into the Centro Cultural Afroecuatoriano. I had completed my first year of graduate school in the ethnomusicology program at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and I was planning to conduct doctoral research on an Andean topic. Upon recounting my visit to my cousins, one asked, “Why

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did you go there? Are you visiting your ancestors?” The racist implication of
the joke was clear to me, and it was a stark reminder that Darwinist evolution
had so deeply engrained itself across societies throughout different parts of the
world, or at least the Americas.

One other experience occurred much more recently, the effects of which
convinced me of the importance that the work of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de
Certeau, and Gilles Deleuze had on attempting to theorize the implications
of place and history in understanding and explaining the workings of politi-
cal and ideological power. While on a short family trip in the mountains of
western North Carolina, my wife and I began a friendly conversation with a
gentleman and local resident, who eventually came around to asking us where
we were from, to which we replied, Los Angeles. Not satisfied, he asked,
“No, where are you really from?” My wife, whose father and mother are from
Peru and Guatemala, respectively, and I had been asked this type of ques-
tion many times before, and I suspect that my two children will be asked the
same question—if they haven’t already. Our obvious Latin@ ethnic features,
it was clear, marked us as not possibly being from here (western North Carolina)
or even our place of birth, Los Angeles! My daughter, who was in fact born
in Durham, will particularly have a lot of explaining to do going back three
generations.

I can’t help but think about and feel the ideological violence that such ques-
tions whip up, especially during the course of a friendly chat among strangers.
I also understand that such experiences do not compare with those of others
who are in a much more vulnerable position, as, for instance, undocumented
immigrants, transgendered people, and so on. In many ways, then, this book
is about how the notion of someone’s origins, regardless of racial, ethnic, sex-
ual, or political status, is indeed a double-edged sword; my wife and I are very
proud of our familial origins in South and Central America, and the histories
of our parents’ immigration to Los Angeles, and we want our children to also
be proud and claim these origins and histories at every opportunity, without,
however, ever ceding their rightful place where they call home, wherever they
happen to be.