



Portraits-in-Place from the Sotavento: A Photo-Dialogue between Abraham Bosque and J.A. Strub

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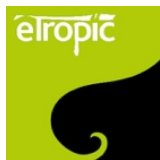
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Abstract

Resulting from a series of conversations between its co-contributors, this photo-dialogue considers themes of nature-culture entanglements through the photographic work of Abraham Bosque, a documentary filmmaker and photojournalist who has lived in the Sotavento region of Mexico since 2017. Bosque's work deals with the challenges implicit in portraying a tropical landscape whose vitality is the impetus for its extractivistic plunder. Through their conversations, Strub and Bosque consider eleven portraits-in-place that highlight, explore, and challenge ways of thinking about the relationships between humankind and nature, parochiality and globalization, tradition and modernity, beauty and violence, and the documentarian and their subject, all considered within the context of the Sotavento's storied tropicity.

Keywords: Veracruz Mexico, portrait photography, ethnomusicology, tropics, place, collaborative ethnography



Introduction: The *Fandango* as a site of Tropical Encounter

I met Abraham Bosque in the summer of 2021 while conducting fieldwork with independent documentarians in Mexico. We were not strangers, having spoken to each other briefly via social media, but our first in-person encounter was serendipitous. We found each other at one in the morning in the middle of a *fandango*, an intense communal celebration that constitutes the heart and soul of a music-and-dance tradition known around the world as *son jarocho*, but locally referred to as *música de cuerdas* (string music).

Bosque is a documentary filmmaker and photographer originally from Toluca in the State of Mexico. In 2017, after studying for a time at la Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, Bosque moved to the Sotavento, a cultural region extending across southern Veracruz and adjacent parts of Oaxaca and Tabasco. The tropical Sotavento is both biologically and culturally rich; it was the homeland of the Olmecs, Mexico's "mother culture", and Cortes' point of entry into the Mesoamerican interior. It is one of few regions in Mexico with a history of African slavery and resistance alike, and has remained an important port of commerce and movement that connects Mexico at large with the wider Caribbean and Atlantic worlds. Like many others, Bosque and I were drawn to the region on account of its endemic musical tradition, the *son jarocho* and its *fandango*.

Having originated in the Sotavento, the *fandango jarocho* has subsequently spread across the globe through an international revival movement. Its adherents are known as *jaraneros*, after the *jaranas* – baroque-influenced regional guitars that come in various shapes and sizes – that comprise the foundational instrumentation of the musical style. Like other string instruments played at *fandangos*, *jaranas* are typically made from tropical hardwoods such as *cedro rojo*, *chagane*, and *palma prieta*, as is the *tarima*, a raised platform on which rotating groups of dancers execute *zapateados* of varying complexity and intensity. While the wardrobes of most contemporary *jaraneros* feature clothing mainly of cotton and polyester, flaxen *guayaberas* and *sombreros* woven from desiccated palm fronds are commonplace fixtures at any *fandango*. Garments made from tropical flora have transitioned in status – from place-based uniforms dictated by necessity into outfits prized by cultural participants on account of their symbolic linkages to a chosen identity.

The poetics of the *fandango* are also deeply tropicalist. Many of the *sones* one might play exhibit bodies of verse that address the natural and human landscape of tropical southern



Mexico. *Sones* such as *el Pájaro Cu* (the cuckoo bird), *la Guacamaya* (the macaw), and *el Pájaro Carpintero* (the woodpecker) recount stories about tropical birds and their temperaments as allegories for human narratives of love, restlessness, and loss. *El Piojo* (lice) and *la Sarna* (scabies) speak of tropical parasites in verses that bridge caution and humour, while *la Morena* (the dark-skinned woman), *la Indita* (the little Indian woman), and *los Negritos* (little Black people) address the human landscape of the tropics in verses that range from racial disparagement to holy adoration.

To be a *jaranero* is to actively engage with a tropical world and worldview. For those born in the Sotavento, the tropical landscape is an inevitable fact of life. However, for those foreigners who choose to engage with the *movimiento jaranero* at its site of original production, a commitment to learning from, dealing with, and being transformed by the tropics is part and parcel of a particular type of personal trajectory. By entering into a dialogue with the tropics, one is also put into a massive human network of tropicalist thought and action. Throughout my five-year involvement in the Sotavento, I've become intimately linked by bonds of friendship and mutual assistance to carpenters, fishermen, cane sugar harvesters, petroleum engineers, rainforest biologists, indigenous land-rights activists, aspiring eco-tourist guides, and others whose work is underpinned by the potentialities and challenges of nature-culture entanglements in the tropics.

Abraham Bosque and I crossed paths on account of our shared interest in the *fandango* as an emblematic expression of *tropicalidad cultural*. Bosque's work as a cinematographer, photographer, documentarian, and director, always returns to questions of culture-in-place. His subject-protagonists are often musicians who exist at the fringes of their traditions. In *Los Ojos del Violín* (2020), Bosque amplifies the voice of Jaime Constantino Osorio Valdez, the last violinist of his generation to play *musica calentana* in the State of Mexico, while forthcoming documentary films *Las Flores de Mi Jardín* and *Tierra Abierta* centre on two performers from the Sotavento – Wicho Lara and Josué Bernardo Marcial Santos, respectively – whose boundary-pushing work and controversial personalities have garnered both deep praise and cutting defamation. Bosque speaks frequently of his desire to challenge folklorized representations of traditional musicians and their art, noting "what interests me more than anything else is the existential side of *son*, the individuals, accounts of real-life." While his work addresses cultural themes, it does not neatly fit into the vast majority of cultural documentary produced about traditional music; Bosque's films deal head-on with the challenges implicit in portraying a tropical landscape whose very vitality is the impetus for its extractivistic plunder.



This outlook applies to his still-photographic work as well; Bosque notes that while he has never found much of a guide in theory, he has found inspiration in the work of fellow photojournalists. He specifically highlights Sebastião Salgado, Sergio Larraín, and Robert Capa, an eclectic trio whose works are linked in their social angle, treatment of the tension between the quotidian and extreme, and use of shadow, depth, and figure, to tell human and natural stories alike. For Bosque, the tropical Sotavento is a place of beauty, generative energy, deep history, and rest; it is also a place that can inspire avarice, encourage vice, and exemplify the fragility of humankind and nature. To me, Bosque's work captures these dramatic contradictions and contrasts by way of both its compositional form and its ethnographic context.

A few weeks after our first meeting, Abraham invited me to visit him in his adopted community of Chacaltianguis. We drank beer out of plastic cups in the sweltering heat, played *son*, and listened to a relentless barrage of wild stories and dirty jokes from one of Abraham's old Sotaventine acquaintances. Later, a torrential downpour characteristic of the tropics drove us out of the open-air cantina, anxious to keep our wooden instruments dry. Roads-turned-rivers upended trash bins as we tramped back to the roomy, mostly empty, house that Abraham was renting at the time. Our friend Carlos Palacios fried plantains as we listened to the rain. We ate them, accompanied by a *torito* (cane liquor blended with coconut milk) and sat around a comically large table, thinking of how we might come to begin to seriously collaborate on a project that explored our link to one another, to *son jarocho*, and to the tropics.

Beginning in September of 2021, this project emerged as a collaboration between Bosque and myself as a way to discursively explore the role of the photographer in portraying and exploring the trellised relationships between nature and culture in the Sotavento. Over the course of seven lengthy phone conversations, we discussed possible guiding themes: placemaking and tropical imagery in musical performance, labour and extraction in the tropics, the paradoxical relationship between marginal remoteness and globalization, self-representation and auto-documentary. Ultimately, we decided to explore all of the above questions through the lens of the photographic portrait-in-context. We came to select, evaluate, and dissect eleven portraits-in-context. The chosen photographs come from three distinctive series, entitled "Negritud Sotaventina" (Sotaventine Blackness), "Mestizaje Sotaventino" (Sotaventine Racial Mixing), and "Viejos Jaraneros" (Old Jarana Players).

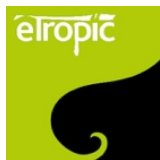


Photo 1





To begin, Bosque selected a photograph taken in late 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to him, it is a portrait not only of a man, but of a place and a way of life associated with that place. Six years ago, Bosque moved to Chacaltianguis, a village on an island in the middle of the Papaloapan, a river that runs through the tropical heart of the Sotavento region and empties into the Gulf of Mexico. The photo, which was taken in near-absolute darkness, required severe alteration, but Bosque says that this allowed him to recreate an aesthetic style reminiscent of the Dutch impressionists.

“In the way that Vermeer made paintings that appeared as near-photos, I wanted to create a photo that appeared as a near-painting,” Bosque tells me.

“This was a totally unexpected capture,” Bosque continues. “I was walking along the river at night, and noticed the *lancha* approaching the dock, so I started to shoot. When the captain, a man named Juvenal Muños, noticed I was there with a camera, he began to take off his mask to greet me and show his full smile, but I found the most powerful photograph to be the one in mid-movement.”

Compositionally, the mask is striking: a dash of iridescence atop a bed of nocturnal earth tones. But Bosque also describes the disposable blue facemask as “the symbol of our times,” a visual marker that will forever be associated with the era in which we live. So too the role of the ferryboat captain is linked to this symbology.

“More than anything, this photo shows the ways in which people had to keep working in spite of the pandemic,” he reflects.

This man had one of the most dangerous jobs, interacting with so many people. For better or for worse, he was the point of contact for many with the outside world. The only way to and from the island is by *lancha*, so all infections, all positive cases, came to the island by way of his little boat.

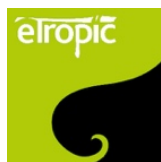


Photo 2





Photo 2 was one of the first photographs Bosque took after moving to the Sotavento. It depicts los Baxim, a family of campesinos, musicians, and instrument builders who reside in a community that Bosque describes as “in the heart of the tropics, but rather distant from basic services.” The Baxim name carries weight among those who are drawn to the Sotavento on account of its music. Given the remoteness of their hometown, the family often must travel great distances to participate in *fandangos* across the region.

In this photo, the family is seen walking from their ranch in el Nopal to the nearest highway in order to board a collective taxi that will bring them to the nearest small city, Santiago Tuxtla, in time for a *fandango* honoring a local patron saint.

“I felt very fortunate to have been invited,” Bosque recounts wistfully. “On those long walks, we had the chance to just be together, to talk. The way they received me, it was special.”

Bosque also notes the symbolic power of the photo’s serendipitous composition. “On the left, we see dry branches, indicating a mature tree, and below we see the oldest member of the family, Doña Juanita. As we move over to the right, we get a more lush view of the tropical landscape, and underneath we see representatives of the family’s younger generations. So we get a sense of the life cycles of the natural environment, but also of the human family, and how these patterns of growth are the same.”

In the next image, Photo 3, we move on to a foreground portrait of Alexander, one of the youngest of the Baxim family. He is seen using a *telar de cintura*, a prehispanic sewing machine, to weave what will become an instrument strap. That process of *becoming* is what interests the photographer.

“As a portrait, it was most important to capture his expression, his concentration” says Bosque, “but I also try to use the aperture to highlight the kinesis of the machine. It is a portrait of work, of someone making something.”

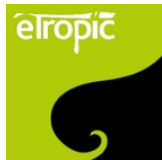


Photo 3



In the Sotavento, it is not uncommon to see children engaged in acts of productive labour. The designation of youth as a time of leisure does not exist in this part of the tropics, where necessity draws even the young into semi-skilled work.

“He’s sewing a product to sell, because even at a young age he understands the necessity of labour,” notes Bosque. “There is a lot of abundance – speaking of materials, techniques, culture – in the tropics, but there is also a great precarity to life, because of historical marginalization, because of distance from the city.”

In spite of this sense of remoteness, Alexander is seen dressed in polyester shorts and a mass-produced undershirt, likely manufactured in a textile factory far away. I muse on this irony in the context of the global economic system, where metropole and hinterland are connected in unpredictable and unbalanced ways. Bosque responds: “The cruel joke is that many of these *traditional* crafts are not for those who make them. They are sold to tourists, to visitors, who then wield them as a supposed marker of authenticity. It’s a purchased identity that nonetheless affords the purchaser a degree of cultural and artistic capital that is not accessible to the producer, who is left invisible.”

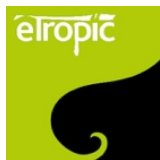


Photo 4





We shift to a backlit portrait of Don Lupe Cardenas. Like los Baxim, Don Lupe belongs to an old guard of traditional musicians in the Sotavento who are still actively sought out by young revivalists.

“This photo is a study in light and shading,” notes Bosque. “I wanted to make note of contrasting textures, and emulate the way in which things might be seen in a nocturnal setting, where most *fandangos* take place.”

In the photo, Don Lupe holds a *jarana* he made from red cedar, a tree endemic to the region. He is wearing a hat woven from palm, another marker of locality that situates the photo within tropical society.

“The *jarana* is an instrument with roots in the colonial period,” says Bosque:

And according to the mythology, there has always been a strong Afro-descendant presence in the music of the Sotavento, because this river valley was one of the few parts of Mexico with a history of African slavery. On the social level, I wanted to foreground the blackness of this music, of the people who play it, its historical and current presence in the region.

Photo 5 is a candid group photograph. Bosque captures a “moment of rest between *sones* in a *fandango*”, during which people are “afforded the chance to chat, relax, stretch, share anecdotes.”

The *fandango jarocho* is the object that connects Bosque and myself; its magnetism brought us both to the Sotavento, and our first meeting was beside a *tarima*, the flat wooden box that amplifies the percussive footwork of *zapateadores*.



Photo 5



“This portrait contains six smiles. Do you realize how rare that is to capture?” “It’s really quite something,” I respond. “Even with the faces that are half-hidden, you can tell that they are smiling, even if you can’t see their lips, their full face.”

Foregrounded in the photo are husband and wife Wicho Lara and Lourdes Junquera. Over the years, Bosque has developed a close relationship with Wicho, whose unconventional lifestyle and boundary-pushing musical approach have drawn scorn and curiosity alike from the wider community of *jaraneros*. Bosque’s forthcoming documentary, *Las Flores de mi Jardín*, is a biographical documentary that centres on Wicho as both a cultural outlier and an emblem of the state of the *fandango* in the twenty-first century.

“The *fandango* is a space for gathering, for closeness, for intimacy and solidarity. At its heart, it is a noble music that allows people to participate regardless of age, regardless of skill, it cuts across generations, across borders.”

“I agree. I mean, that’s why we’re both here, right?”



Bosque's work often deals with challenging themes, of life in a region besieged by war and threatened by climate change and neocolonial economies of extraction. As such, he deliberately avoids celebratory narratives that posit the *fandango* as a space removed from the pressures and problems of its social context. Nonetheless, a profound love for a thing can empower us to see beyond its insidious vices and implicit dangers, enabling us to get to the heart of the thing itself as a place of profound encounter, for good or ill.

Photo 6



This backlit group portrait shows a group of young musicians fleeing from a field of sugar cane set ablaze. Here, we see silhouettes of five figures holding the instruments emblematic of the *fandango jarocho*, including a *tarima* and a *quijada*, a dried donkey jaw used as a percussion instrument. Smoke and fire consume the top two-thirds of the frame, evoking a terrible rapture, but the *jaraneros* in front embody resistance, resilience, and the ever-presence of the artist.

The burning of cane fields is an agricultural technique that removes extraneous debris, leaving only the sugary stalks to be harvested. Bosque notes that it has increasingly come under criticism for its deleterious environmental impacts, but remains common. As we spoke about this photo, Bosque mused on the challenges of working as a foreigner in the



Sotavento. “Even after five years here, I find myself surprised by certain phenomena, certain insects, behaviours even.”

Bosque noted that this photo was taken in a moment of flight. Lamenting the fact that the photo did not come out the way he originally intended on account of the rushed exodus, bosque reminisces: “we were on land that we did not realize was private and the overseers came out and began to reproach us. We got out of there very quickly, because here land is often worth more than a human life.”

“Being a documentarian, I often find myself in risky situations. Because I am not from here, I find this place to be very unpredictable and unstable, speaking both of natural and human phenomena. I often find myself with people in their moments of vulnerability, or I am caught off-guard by some whim of nature, a sudden downpour, or getting infected with malaria or dengue. Achieving that symbiosis with the natural and human environment, as someone who is rather alien, is always the challenge, but also it is the reward.”

Photo 7





“A portrait, without a face.” This is how Bosque describes Photo 7, a close-up shot of a worn hand stained with the ashy residue of the sugarcane after it is burned.

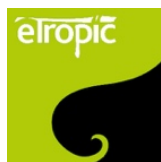
Even before this project materialized, we’ve spoken many times about the moral hazards of ethnographic photography. Far too often, faces of individuals from the tropics have been framed by outsiders as symbolic archetypes which represent a profession, a region, a *people*. After reviewing several photographs together, we chose to include this one here because of its distinctive focus.

“Let’s use the one with the hand,” I recommend. “If we can’t name the *cañalero*, if we’re talking in the aggregate, let’s use the hand, not his face.”

“I agree,” says Bosque. “The hand is the site of labor. From there, you can more safely speak in the aggregate. Every person’s face is distinctive, just as we all have different life experiences, but when working as a field labourer – with monocrops – the strain, the repetition, the damage, is shared.”

Out of focus, though still clearly centered within the field of view, is a machete. Bosque notes its symbolic value as “representative of violence, but also of the rural way of life, and of a type of social and political resistance that has historically emerged from that lifestyle.”

Photos 8 and 9 shift in focus from the production of sugarcane, with its plantation landscapes and histories of labour (including slave, indentured, and underpaid), to the consumption of the refined product. After discussing the two following photographs, I suggested their pairing.



eTropic 21.1 (2021) Special Issue. Tropical Landscapes: nature~culture entanglements

Photos 8 & 9





Both photographs show a fleeting escape attained through the consumption of cane sugar. The first shows two *cañaleros* drinking *aguardiente* (cane liquor) at a typical Sotaventine cantina, while the other depicts a young girl blissfully eating candies in front of a moss-covered wall.

“These two carry a lot of symbolic weight,” says Bosque. “The products that come from the sugarcane are poisonous, and the joy they bring is achieved at a great expense. It makes the consumer sick, and it is also an environmental and social disaster.”

Like the rest of the photos in this collection, these are two portraits that speak of the tropical landscape. “However,” notes Bosque, “unlike the others, these pose a contrast, a challenge to the aesthetic elements of beauty and community. What I mean is, there are decadent elements that are also intimately intertwined with life in the tropics. Look at these workers who spend the last days of their life working and drinking, or this little girl eating sugar in a state with one of the highest rates of diabetes in the country.”

Bosque continues: “If you analyze the two photos, the men have faces filled with melancholy and anxiety, but the face of the girl is more joyous.”

“It’s crazy how two derivatives of the same product can provide similar feelings of relief, of momentary rest, but with two opposing affective responses,” I comment.

“And with each passing year, more and more land is purchased and dedicated to the production of sugar cane. Land that could be left wild or used to produce food for local people is being used to create an export product that is basically poison, but people are addicted, and there’s money there, so that’s how it goes,” Bosque concludes.

“It’s almost like the narco-economy.”

“Yes, it’s the same.”



Photo 10



This photograph is a portrait of one of the most common activities in this community of Mata de Caña in the Chacaltianguis municipality: the harvest and local sale of mangos.

“People tell me that in the sixties and seventies, mango was king here,” says Bosque. “More and more land is being turned over to sugarcane and banana, but women like this still have trees on their property, and they sell to the community during the harvest seasons.”

Bosque notes the softness of this photo’s colour palate in contrast to the sharp intensity of those that deal with the theme of sugarcane. “Those photos are very violent, but this one is gentle,” says Bosque. “Her labour is, ultimately, an act of generosity; the mangos are offered to everybody. The sugar cane isn’t offered to anybody; it’s governed by jealousy.”

“Ripped from the ground, forged in fire, sold to foreign companies,” I add.

“This photo, like the next, use pastel as a way to; curate mood, to transmit a message without saying it outright. It paints a noble act with soft colours.”



Photo 11



“This final photo highlights a girl who was getting off the *lancha*, the same one we opened with,” notes Bosque. “The subject, a young woman, had to move to a big city to study, but she always comes back home to Chacaltianguis for vacation. People like her give yet another flavour to the tropical landscape precisely because they’ve left – they know the world beyond, but they return, and they care for the tropics, because it’s their home, and they know its value by way of comparison.”

Bosque notes that the composition and colour scheme of this photograph was inspired by the cinematography of Iranian filmmaker Abbás Kiarostami. “I wanted to play with pastel colours, creating a soft, almost dreamlike image. The films [by Kiarostami] have that quality, of almost appearing animated, even if they’re live-action. I also am trying to capture the kinesis of the moment through a fast shutter speed.”

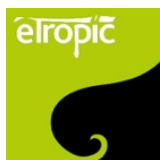
Also foregrounded is the contrast between old and new. “The *lancha*, the trees, the river, all of these things have been here for a very long time, some are practically prehistoric,” muses Bosque. “And then we have the subject of the photo, who is dressed in contemporary clothing, holding a face mask in her hand, and it’s clear she’s living in the twenty-first century.”



As we conclude our conversation, Bosque makes one final comment.

“The tropics have produced some very hard people, lots of resentment, and anger. There’s a lot of individualism, a lot of people who claim their bit of the world and don’t let go. And then there’s the violence of the day to day. But I like to think that there’s a way to find an equilibrium between individuals and the collective, and between all of us and the landscape around us.”

This photo-essay is a product of our discussions; as such, it is imperfect and unfinished by design. Working across and around the disparities that separate us – national borders, inequities in internet access, and lack of a shared mother tongue – presents challenges to collaboration, but also opens opportunities for new understandings of how we see, interpret, and present the tropical world around us as artists and researchers.



Acknowledgements

To those who brought us here – we acknowledge and thank all of the personages who are represented in this photo-dialogue, specifically: Juvenal Muños, Wicho Lara, Lourdes Junquera, Don Lupe Cardenas, Guadalupe Ramirez, the Baxim family, and those whose portraits are left unnamed by choice and circumstance. Additionally, we extend our gratitude to all of the laborers, men and women, who dedicate themselves to working the tropical landscape, as well as the tropics themselves, and the international musical movement they inspired that brought Abraham and I into conversation and friendship. Finally, I would like to thank the Tinker Foundation for providing me with the funding that enabled me to travel to Mexico in the summer of 2021, and the editors of *eTropic*, who have been so supportive and helpful throughout the proofing process.

J.A. Strub is a student of ethnomusicology at the University of Texas at Austin. His research centers around questions of self-representation, media circulation, and participatory cultural economies among musicians, audiences, and community documentary makers in Mexico. Originally from New York, USA, Strub holds an undergraduate degree in economics and statistics and had worked in a variety of social services and activist settings before returning to academia, affording his work a diversity of perspective and a focus on applied scholarship. His forthcoming co-authored book, *Maldito Coronavirus!: Mapping Latin American Musical Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, is scheduled for release by Equinox Publishing in late 2023.

Abraham “Bosque” Ávila Quintero is a photographer, documentarian, and film producer from Toluca in the State of Mexico. He holds a degree in philosophy from la Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México and has spent the last five years living in Chacaltianguis, Veracruz, a town in the Papaloapan river basin. Bosque has directed, edited, filmed, and participated in the production of various documentary films, including *Los Ojos del Violín* (2020), *Como el Río y las Mariposas* (2017), and *Tierra Abierta* (forthcoming). His photojournalistic work has been shared in *Milenio*, *El Portal*, *Radio Zapote*, among other outlets.