



# Vodú Chic: Cuba's Haitian Heritage, the Folkloric Imaginary, and the State

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**Vodú Chic: Cuba's Haitian Heritage, the Folkloric Imaginary, and the State**

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of African and African American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of African American Studies

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Vodú Chic: Cuba's Haitian Heritage, the Folkloric Imaginary, and the State

Abstract

Hundreds of thousands of Haitian agricultural laborers arrived in Cuba to cut cane as the Cuban sugar industry was expanding between the 1910s and the 1930s, and many settled permanently on the island. Historically, Haitian laborers occupied the lowest strata in Cuban society. Until relatively recently, the maintenance of Haitian traditions in Cuba was associated with rural isolation and poverty. Today however, the continuation of Haitian customs is no longer associated with isolation, but exactly the opposite. Cuba's Haitian communities are increasingly linked with cultural institutes, heritage festivals, music promoters, and the tourism industry. In Cuba's socialist economy, "folklore" is a valuable resource that demonstrates the unity of a multi-racial and multi-ethnic nation and attracts tourists. Music, dance, and rituals associated with Vodú have been re-imagined for the public stage. The "folkloric imaginary" creates new careers and opportunities for people of Haitian descent in Cuba. *Haitiano-cubanos* themselves have found innovative ways to transform the once abject into the now exotic, and are currently gaining a public presence in Cuba through folkloric performance.

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## Chapter One – Introduction

Scholars characterizing Cuba often effectively ignore the eastern portion of the island and its citizens of Haitian descent. Most anthropologists, historians, musicologists, and other social researchers—both Cuban and foreign—have focused their studies on Havana. Compared with the copious publications on the performance genres and social phenomena of western Cuba, eastern Cuba’s varied identities are largely absent from the record. The highly centralized Cuban state has many academies, institutes, and organizations headquartered in Havana, so the popular traditions of that region have been privileged in the distribution of resources and, more importantly, used as the models that represent the nation and *cubanidad*, or national character (Hagedorn 2001, Schmidt 2006). Cultural researchers, both Cuban and foreign, tend to gloss Cuba as a creole mix of Spanish and African cultural elements, with a dash of Asian in the mix.<sup>1</sup> When scholars confine their studies to Havana and to the work of others who have studied Havana, they all too often conclude that Cuba is a Latin American nation and leave its Caribbean facets unconsidered.

But Cuba was always a part of the greater Caribbean, an environment of movement and migration. Most notably during the early republican period after the wars of independence, migrants from many places re-settled in Cuba. Laborers came from neighboring islands, often Haiti but also Jamaica. These immigrants and their descendants are integral to the Cuban cultural mix, particularly in the eastern provinces. Theories on Caribbean migrant identity have generally focused on metropole–periphery paradigms (Gilroy 1993, Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001,

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese indentured labor program in the latter nineteenth century that added an Asian element to Cuba’s cosmopolitan mix and resulted in the small Chinatown still extant in Havana has received scholarly attention and is typically briefly mentioned in summaries of Cuban social history created by tourist bureaus or cultural institutions. For scholarly works, see for example Juan Pérez de la Riva 1966, 2000, Chang 2005, García Triana and Eng Herrera 2009, Guanche 2011, and López 2013.

McAlister 2002, Hall 2003, Richman 2005). Typically, North American and European cities are envisioned as destinations and Caribbean islands as sources. But intra-regional migration largely has been overlooked.<sup>2</sup> My ethnography of *haitiano-cubano* folklore engages with theories about migrants and their descendants in an understudied setting: the personal, social, and political environment of Cuba.



Figure 1 – Map the Caribbean – courtesy of C. Scott Walker  
Digital Cartography Specialist – Harvard Library

More than 500 miles from *la capital*, Cuba’s second largest city, Santiago, enjoys a distinctive cultural milieu. As a result of more than one wave of migration from what is today Haiti, unique lifeways and traditions set eastern Cuba apart from Havana and contribute to the

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<sup>2</sup> Brodwin’s work on Haitians in Martinique (2003) is a notable exception.

creation of a thriving regional culture. My project explores the importance of this *haitiano-cubano* presence in Cuba. The neglected study of Cuba's east is central to theorizing the gaps in narratives of Cuban national culture. The story of Cuba's unheralded Haitian heritage informs theories of the agency of migrants and their descendants in the formation of a purported national character or identity, and also illuminates the role of expressive arts as vectors in this process. My research focuses on how the descendants of Haitian migrants perceive and showcase their distinctiveness, as they balance between enacting their *cubanidad* and performing their independence from it. Eastern Cuba's Haitian influence can help us understand the social history of Cuba in particular and constructions of national identity in general.

Many scholars have unquestioningly accepted and then repeated as gospel that the most important flow of migrants from what is today Haiti to Cuba occurred in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, when French planters and free people of color, some bringing along enslaved individuals, fled the tumult of the Haitian Revolution. While this wave of migration was important in developing the formerly torpid and underdeveloped town of Santiago, the glamour of Santiago's "French" heritage has overshadowed the much larger and more recent twentieth century migration of hundreds of thousands of Haitian laborers. They have been overlooked and their contributions discounted.

When Cubans of Haitian descent *are* considered, it is as foreigners who never integrated, who remain "other," and who are not really Cubans. They are described as the poorest and most marginalized and as rural, with little influence on urban Cuban society, the nation, or Cuban-ness. But, actually, these hundreds of thousands of laborers were the humble pillars of eastern Cuba's republican-era sugar wealth. They also influenced Cuban society and were influenced by it through interacting, and intermarrying, with Cubans. Although there are no official statistics

about how many Cubans are of Haitian descent, the presence of hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers in the early twentieth century, many of whom stayed in Cuba, marrying and forming strong communities in which Haitian language and customs were (and still are) maintained for generations, has left a profound imprint on eastern Cuba. Contemporary *haitiano-cubanos* make use of performance art and spiritual practices to create and maintain their cultural identity as a valued and integrated minority within the Cuban state.

Performance arts and spiritual practices are repositories of identification in African-diasporic societies throughout the Caribbean. By “identity” and “identification” I mean a communal sense of distinctiveness, the perception of a shared heritage. This is not static, but instead an agentive and strategic process of choosing, navigating what historian Vincent Brown calls “claim-making” to “collective forms of belonging” (2009:1232,1236). While dancing and drumming are used for entertainment, enjoyment, and to communicate with the spirit world, these art forms are also social resources or “cultural capital” in the sense described by Bourdieu (1977). For *haitiano-cubanos*, knowledge of ritual procedures and traditions, language, songs, dances, and rhythms are cultural resources that promote social mobility. In a religious context, these skills are vital to maintaining the goodwill of the spirits and petitioning their assistance. Additionally, cultural expertise confers respect and status within communities and can attract interest and support from larger organizations such as cultural institutes or tourism bureaus.

I have found that folkloric performance troupes are currently a key vehicle in efforts to preserve, share, and valorize *haitiano-cubano* culture. Transforming the formerly vilified into the now enchanting, a marginalized ethnic minority uses dance, music, and their reputation for otherworldliness. By focusing on Cubans of Haitian descent—an ethnic group historically at the bottom of Cuba’s social ladder—we can learn about the resources that denigrated communities

use to foster pride, create social cohesion, and build social and cultural capital. My project delves into the complex interrelationships between an ethnic minority and the policies and bureaucracies with which members cooperate. Various actors are part of the story, including government ministries of culture and tourism, the ethnographers and arts promoters who “discovered” the Haitian presence in Cuba, performers in folkloric troupes, Vodú priests and priestesses, and young people of Haitian descent in both rural and urban areas. Today, a new generation is choosing how to represent and perform its heritage.

Although people of Haitian descent in Cuba have been viewed as an underprivileged and disenfranchised group isolated from the main currents of Cuban society, I argue that they are not cut off, but instead braided into varied national and transnational streams, including networks of ethnographers and institutions whose mission it is to research and present heritage and culture, governmental initiatives that sponsor the performance of folklore, and international promoters and tourism. Studying what I call the “folkloric imaginary”—how “folklore” is imagined and deployed—can offer important insights into how Cubans of Haitian descent have wrought an identity of their own in their new homeland. Defining “folklore” as “cultura popular tradicional” (traditional popular culture), Cuban cultural institutions are tasked with employing it in molding national unity. My project examines how folkloric performance troupes and community religious specialists cooperate and intersect with academic institutes and government bureaucracies, and thus how both “insiders” and “outsiders” play a role in maintaining a minority culture in Cuba.

*Haitiano-cubanos* have created a place for their traditions while maintaining their distinctiveness in Cuba. I consider how they have deployed their performance practices and their spiritual beliefs under the state-sanctioned rubric of “folklore” and how folklore performance can function as a social, political, and economic resource, for both the individual and the nation. In



*Choreographic Politics*, Anthony Shay contends that folkloric dance companies offer various publics “cultural representations that are in fact multilayered political and ethnographic statements designed to form positive images of their representative nation-states” and that performances can be “elaborate and often highly spectacularized public relations statements, of great subtlety and sophistication” (2002:2). Staged folklore may transmit emotional messages advertising the national body’s vitality, wholesomeness, innocence, dignity, artistry, unity, poise, aplomb, or other characteristics. Shay maintains that folklore ensembles use local traditions abstracted for the stage to broadcast political, ethnic, and cultural lessons and accrue cultural capital for their nation-states (2002:4). In Cuba, state agencies, touristic bureaus, and institutions promote local traditions in an effort to increase the cultural capital of both the region and nation state, but I contend that this is only half the story. We must also consider how Haitian-Cuban cultural producers choose to represent their customs to the public, and how they claim participation in the space of *cubanidad*, or Cuban national identity. This dissertation delves into their inspiration, motivations, and aspirations.

Folkloric dance and music troupes signify pride in Cuba’s heritage and also help governmental agencies, such as the Ministry of Tourism, showcase the island’s unique qualities to foreign visitors who possess much-needed hard currency. I particularly draw on the work of Katherine Hagedorn (2001) and J. Lorand Matory (2005), who examine the negotiation of identity in Afro-diasporic societies in the Americas and scrutinize how race and ethnicity interface with national ideologies. Both explore how transnational links influence African-inspired religions and how in turn, performance genres have responded to changing social and political environments.

Hagedorn focuses on the performance of the Cuban spiritual system known as *Santería*, both during religious rituals and as staged in secular settings for the public by Cuba's national dance troupe, the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the government of Fidel Castro implemented sweeping programs targeting education, the economy, political and social structures, and the arts. The "new society" envisioned by the revolutionaries would demonstrate egalitarianism and unity. The officially secular Cuban regime began to sponsor the performance of folklore—a genre that included staged versions of Afro-Cuban religious events—to demonstrate the inclusion of the island's black population in national cultural identity. The Conjunto Folklórico Nacional was launched in 1962. Many members were religious practitioners who were deeply engaged with the spiritual systems that were adapted and choreographed for public performances. But the goals espoused by administrators and the hierarchies recognized by members were not always in accord, and the venture of transforming religious rituals into concert shows was not always smooth (Hagedorn 2001). Different cities and environments in Cuba have varied trajectories of imagining, developing, funding, and promoting folklore. I apply Hagedorn's study of the creation of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional in Havana to an analysis of the unique history of *haitiano-cubano* performance in Cuba's eastern provinces, along with the changing public role of the spiritual system Vodú, as I discuss in Chapters Three and Five.

Matory's historic and ethnographic examination of the transnational nexuses that shape the practice of *Candomblé* in Bahia, Brazil, illuminates forces and themes also present in eastern Cuba, where I conducted fieldwork. Matory argues that African Atlantic spiritual systems in the Americas (and their attendant music, dances, and ritual praxes) are not inevitably most successfully maintained in environments where isolation, poverty, or segregation play a role in

maintaining their “purity.” Instead, travel and transnational affiliations, prosperity, and ties to literati, cultural activists, researchers, or officials may be vital to their durability. He notes that while “priests and practitioners, no less than the social scientists and politicians who seek to speak for them, tend to emphasize the ancientness and fixity of Candomblé,” it is paradoxically true that lifeways and traditions “endure not *despite* their involvement in translocal dialogues but *because* of it” (2005:1, emphasis in the original). Matory reasons that our intention should be to understand “supposedly local and primordial ‘folk’ cultures and ‘primitive’ religions not primarily in terms of their roots in a pristine past but in the context of the dynamic politics, economics, and long-distance communication that are the lived realities of the ‘folk’” (2005:2).

Communities of Haitian descendants stereotypically have been deemed the poorest and most isolated groups in Cuba, and their inaccessibility has been suggested as the reason for the preservation of their dances, music, language, and customs (Pedro 1966, 1967, Guanche and Moreno 1988, McLeod 2000, James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007). Historian Barry Carr avows, “And when they were not mocked, Haitians were treated as objects of fear. Terrifying stories of Haitian ferocity and supernatural activities circulated widely in the campo. References to the ‘primitive’ religious customs, witchcraft, and voodoo practices of the Haitians were common. Along the continuums of ‘civilized practices’ and ‘racial quality,’ Haitians were relegated to last place” (1998:94). James, Millet, and Alarcón enumerate multiple factors of discrimination against Haitians: as blacks, as foreigners with a strange language and customs, and as poor and uneducated laborers (2007:80). I assert that Haitian identity in Cuba today is less a fragment of cultural survival than a decision. If being Haitian has been synonymous with being disadvantaged in Cuba, why not assimilate and disappear into the wider Afro-Cuban population? While some Cubans of Haitian descent have assimilated, many others go to great effort to uphold

and showcase their culture. As *haitiano-cubanos* strive to incorporate “Haitianness” into the ways in which Cuba is imagined as a nation, assorted communities and institutions are part of the narrative. Similarly to Candomblé communities described by Matory, the Haitian diasporic community in Cuba thrives in part because of its interaction with translocal dialogues. The desires, motivations, and networks of individuals such as Vodú clerics and celebrants, folkloric performers, public intellectuals, and state entities all shape Cuba’s Haitian diaspora, as I explore in Chapters Three and Four.

#### National Identity, “Social Poetics,” Ethnicity, and Race in Cuba

Narratives of Cuba’s national ideology were formed by an extended struggle for sovereignty. First, Cubans fought protracted wars of independence during much of the late nineteenth century. Subsequently, aspirations for a *Cuba libre* were foiled by decades of a pseudo-colonial relationship with the United States in the early twentieth century (Helg 1995, Pérez 1998, Ferrer 1999, de la Fuente 2001). Then, after Cuba’s incorporation into the Soviet bloc following Fidel Castro’s victory in the Revolution of 1959, the ensuing U.S.-led embargo and anti-communist posture triggered an ongoing siege mindset that championed national unity above all (Pérez 1995:vii-x).

Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld posits that the “nation-state is ideologically committed to ontological self-perpetuation for all eternity...it perpetuates the semiotic illusion of cultural fixity” and, in its role as a “moralizing” entity, it may well try to impose a static ideology on others...” (2005:21). But he encourages us to search “behind the façades of national unanimity” to examine the complex interrelationship of nation states and expressive culture, what he calls a *social poetics* (2005:1). How then, do Cubans of Haitian heritage engage in “social poetics” vis-

à-vis the Cuban state? They draw on the expressive arts of folkloric performance to emphasize their ethnic distinctiveness and their religiosity while *also* dramatizing their inclusion in Cuba's socialist national project.

The Cuban state presents itself as secular, ethnically united, and free from racial, gender, and class inequities. In official discourse, it is populated by patriotic, hardworking, self-sacrificing citizens who subordinate personal advancement and material acquisition to the exigent needs of a developing nation threatened by a powerful neighbor to the north and its destructive economic embargo (Pérez 1995:348-349).<sup>3</sup> Because socialist societies deemphasize financial incentives in order to foster radical equality, Robin Moore argues that "leaders make use of ideas in their attempts to foster cohesion," and notes that moralizing discourses teach school children in Cuba about the importance of the revolution and the sacrifices of heroes and martyrs, while billboards and slogans in public spaces exhort citizens to achieve higher levels of production and participate in social service (2006a: 8-9). He reasons that in socialist societies, arts may appeal precisely because they can be spaces of complex interpretation, ambiguity, or double meaning and therefore can be "a point of negotiation between individuals, with their unique backgrounds, interests, and opinions, and official organizations" (2006:9).

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<sup>3</sup> The moralizing position of the socialist project is exemplified in Fidel Castro's portrayal of the Cuban revolution as "a great moral victory" in a speech given on the occasion of a 1965 national ceremony broadcast on radio and television for award-winning sugar cane cutters, during which he said: "In the search for the ways to construct socialism and communism, there is much debate about what are the best methods...For us [this] prize given the workers is, above all, a matter of honor (applause)...much more valuable than the material prize they are going to receive (applause)...is...moral recognition...Furthermore, we must know of the great volume of moral energy...that can be contained in the human heart...as revolutionaries, we can never reject the idea of a collectivity made up of men and women of superior human feelings (applause)...it cannot be denied that during these years of revolution, the number of men who are outstanding because of their virtues, their generosity, and their courage, is increasing. They have shown this in many cases with their zest for work, as was shown in this very sugar harvest." Accessed at: <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1965/19650724.html>. Many of Fidel Castro's speeches have been compiled and translated into English by the Latin American Network Information Center ("lanic") a web resource hosted by the University of Texas at Austin.

My research finds that dance, music, and song are key vehicles through which descendants of Haitian migrants in eastern Cuba express their distinctiveness. Haitian customs in agriculture and herbal medicine faded in Cuba with the establishment of collective farming and the spread of public health programs under the socialist government after the 1959 Revolution (James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007). This trend has accelerated since the dissolution of the Soviet bloc and Cuba's subsequent efforts to re-insert itself into the global economy as an autonomous socialist state. Folkloric troupes are currently a key channel by which *haitiano-cubanos* articulate their hyphenated identity, valorize their heritage in the face of discrimination, and position themselves to access state and international resources. Because folkloric performance can simultaneously demonstrate inclusion and uniqueness, *haitiano-cubano* performers showcase the diversity of Cuba's unity, drawing attention to their difference while at the same time simultaneously signaling their inclusion.<sup>4</sup>

As they claim *cubanidad* while also emphasizing customs and practices that reflect their Haitianness and foreignness, Cubans of Haitian descent navigate multifaceted loyalties and categories of belonging. They may simultaneously assert national, regional, and ethnic memberships as they quest to define themselves in ways that bond their past and their present. People of Haitian descent in Cuba often refer to themselves using the term *haitiano-cubano*. In Spanish, this reflects the notion that they are Haitian first but also completely Cuban. The English counterpart "Haitian-American" does not carry exactly the same meaning. In English "Haitian" is an adjective that describes a type of "American" rather than an assertion of two equally principal categories.<sup>5</sup> *Haitiano-cubanos* also sometimes refer to themselves as "haitiano"

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<sup>4</sup> My appreciation goes to ethnomusicologist Corinna Campbell and anthropologist Sharon Kivenko for fruitful conversations about the relationship of folkloric dance to nationalism.

<sup>5</sup> My appreciation is extended to literary scholar Kahlil Chaar-Pérez for help in this parsing of meaning.

despite being born in Cuba and never having visited Haiti. Speaking with people of Haitian heritage, I found a strong sense of Haitianness that did not exclude *cubanidad*. In the village of Thompson in Santiago province, Odilia “Matiti” Solo Soyé, the lead singer of a local folkloric group, explained her simultaneous fidelities: “I am Haitian. My dream is to someday visit Haiti. And I’m Cuban. I was born here, and I love my country.”<sup>6</sup> People of Haitian descent in Cuba may also refer to themselves as “de herencia haitiana” or “descendencia haitiana” or “ascendencia haitiana” (of Haitian heritage/descent/ancestry). *Haitiano-cubanos* mark ethnicity as a core category of allegiance while simultaneously asserting national belonging.

Regionalism as well as ethnicity saturates *haitiano-cubano* identity. Although economic prospects in the capital have drawn people of Haitian descent west to Havana for many years, eastern Cuba is still considered the locus of Haitianness. The migration of Haitian laborers to eastern Cuba during the sugar expansion of the early twentieth century is important to the divergences in the historical, political, and economic development of the east versus the west. Regional character stereotyping in Cuba is understudied, but notable in imaginaries of citizenship and national belonging, as we shall see later in this chapter.

Haitianness is racially marked as a sub-category of blackness; Haitians are considered to be among the “blackest of the black.” Haitians also have been subject to racist prejudices associating African spirituality with witchcraft and barbarity, and this merits a deeper discussion of Haitian religion, offered in Chapter Three. Todd Ramón Ochoa observes that “Since the Haitian Revolution, the figure of ‘the Haitian’ has served as the most abject and frightening mask Cuban whites could paint over African society and culture” (2010:209). Unlike in the United States, race in Cuba was not systematized by a “one-drop” rule. Rather, Cubans, like many other Caribbeans and Latin Americans, view race as a continuum. They employ various terms and

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<sup>6</sup> From a conversation on January 14, 2011.

expressions that describe skin shades, phenotypes, hair texture, and categories of racial admixture.

Racial statistics about the Cuban populace are disputed. The United Nations World Directory of Minorities notes:

Estimates of the percentage of people of African descent in the Cuban population vary enormously, ranging from 33.9 per cent to 62 per cent. This is partly a question of self-perception, as census figures are based on how Cubans define themselves. As in many Latin American and Caribbean countries, there is also a large 'mulatto' or ethnically mixed population, and colour, class and social status are closely interlinked. Few Cubans are either 'pure' white or black. Definitions of 'colour' are as much the result of social criteria as of somatic classification. Afro-Cubans are most prevalent in the eastern part of the island and in districts of Havana. Taking all of this into consideration, the fact that there has been a significant exodus of 'white' Cubans from the island means that Afro-Cubans have now come to represent a larger proportion of the overall population and are now thought to constitute closer to 70 per cent of the total.<sup>7</sup>

De la Fuente, examining the 1981 Cuban census (which allowed respondents to choose from four categories: white, black, mestizo, and Asian) notes that 66 percent of the population was classified as "white," a number that for many journalists and scholars seemed much too high. He hypothesizes that the self-reporting of racial categories may complicate statistics, as has increased interracial marriage and greater out-migration of whites, possibly making those of mixed race on the island perceive themselves as the lighter-skinned category (2001:308).

In Cuba, race is not widely reckoned as a category of political allegiance. Although this is slowly changing, discussing racial inequality has been deemed politically provocative, even anti-revolutionary, because doing so is considered contrary to national unity. Cuban intellectual Tomás Fernández Robaina, known for his publications about race and public discussion of the subject, commented in a recent interview in *80 grados*, "se suponía que hablar del problema

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<sup>7</sup> Source available at: <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=49749d342c>.



racial era crear el problema” (discussing racial problems openly was believed to create the problem).<sup>8</sup> In the ideal socialist society, a true Revolutionary cannot be a racist. However, nor do they identify racially. Racial identifications are still regarded as potential areas of disunity (Guanche 1996:53, Chomsky 2000, de la Fuente 2001, Fernández Robaina 2013).

Proclaiming that *cubanidad* was “more than white, more than black,” Jose Martí, a key leader in the independence movement and the archetypical Cuban patriot of the late nineteenth century, envisioned a postcolonial society that would be beyond race.<sup>9</sup> But after the wars of independence, black veterans, a key ingredient in the victory, found that hard-fought opportunities for greater political participation and economic achievement didn’t materialize. Instead, they remained sidelined and tensions grew until Cuba’s first and only black political party, the Partido Independiente de Color, staged an uprising in 1912 (Helg 1995). After the rising was brutally repressed, Cubans of color no longer organized on the basis of race, instead going about their advancement in other ways (Moore 1997:30, de la Fuente 1998:59-60). Black intellectuals promoted education, training, and participation in civic and labor organizations. Many black working people continued to find spaces of mutual support and autonomy in their spiritual traditions, their musical events, rumbas, clubs, and religions brotherhoods (Helg 1995:243-248).

The 1959 Revolution proclaimed an end to discrimination and based its social contract on doctrines of equality. Through legislation, social programs, and policies in education, health, and employment, Cubans would become fully realized “new citizens” (Guevara 1965, Domínguez

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<sup>8</sup> *80 grados* is a digital journal of culture and politics based in Puerto Rico. The interview solicits Fernández Robaina’s thoughts about the recent demotion of another Cuban public intellectual—Roberto Zurbano—from his position as editor at the Casa de las Americas publishing house in Havana after publishing an op-ed in the New York Times about current racism in Cuba. It is available at: <http://www.80grados.net/roberto-zurbano-y-el-debate-sobre-el-racismo-en-cuba/>.

<sup>9</sup> In Ripoli 1995:52, originally published in *Patria* April 16, 1893.

1978:197-201, Ubieta Gómez 2012:161-182). Marxist dialogues focused social and economic relations on class. But while the Revolution banned institutional discrimination, racial prejudice proved more difficult to eliminate by fiat. While racism was condemned, it was thought that examination of the theme was no longer needed because social discrimination would quickly fade. De la Fuente explains, “Beginning in the 1960s, the new authorities claimed that racial discrimination had been eliminated from the island. Racism was presented as an undesirable legacy of the colonial and ‘semicolonial’ past, one that had been wiped out...race was treated as a divisive issue, its open discussion as a threat to the ever needed national unity...The government had ‘solved’ the racial problem: to speak about it would only generate problems and create unnecessary divisions” (1998:61). Moore observes that any activism against racism was held back by the “militarized state of the nation following the Bay of Pigs attack; for some time, officials equated the discussion of such problems with criticism of the revolution. They feared that assertions of racial difference might be used by enemies to divide the Cuban people and thus discouraged the study or projection of a distinct Afro-Cuban identity” (2006b: 6). Racial activism and political engagement based on racial solidarity was censored in the “new society.” Since political organizations, labor unions, media, and other organs were subsumed into the state, performance, music, and religion have been some of the few civil spaces left for specifically black identification and congregation (Moore 2006a: 196, 201).

Since the collapse of the Socialist bloc and Cuba’s subsequent re-entry into a wider global economy, particularly through tourism, social inequalities, in what was a remarkably uniform and regulated society, have grown (Hernández Reguant 2009). Contact with foreigners, and also remittances from family abroad have exacerbated social differences between those who have access to hard currency and those who don’t. Race has begun to emerge, carefully, as an

area of debate (de la Fuente 2000:199-200, Espina and Rodríguez 2010, Fernández Robaina 2013).<sup>10</sup>

In what ways do Cubans of Haitian descent relate to race? Categories of belonging to which they subscribe include, as we have seen, ethnicity and regionalism, while they also claim national belonging, or *cubanidad*. Do they also relate from a point of view of blackness? I argue that they do, but not overtly, and will explore these issues in more depth in Chapter Four, via a series of interviews with *haitiano-cubanos* who publicly perform their heritage and have become spokespeople for their community. In the context of a paucity of independent political and civil organizations, cultural performance can be a statement of social belonging and an instrument of change. Judith Bettelheim makes the case that in performing in Santiago's carnival and festivals, *haitiano-cubanos* attest to their "continued visibility in Cuban culture and consequently in Cuban history (2007:5). *Haitiano-cubano* folkloric groups intervene in racial debates, if not overtly, through performance of pride in heritage by black actors.

### Folklore and Authenticity

The notion of "authenticity," like "identity," merits discussion. Folkloric dance and music groups and the organizations that sponsor them present "traditional culture" and "heritage." People of Haitian descent in Cuba explain that they strive to preserve their traditions with "authenticity" and "correctness." But they also adapt and innovate on the customs of their grandparents. Carlos Medina Martínez, grandson of Silvia "Titina" Hilmo Sandy, the founder of Petit Dancé, a celebrated Haitian-Cuban folkloric group in Las Tunas, explains: "In the folkloric group, my grandmother always choreographed the dances exactly as they were done at home in

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<sup>10</sup> See also <http://www.temas.cult.cu/debates/libro%204/179-205%20raza.pdf> for digests of a series of panel discussions about race hosted in 2009 by Rafael Hernández, editor of the Cuban journal *Temas*.

her house-temple, just as she had learned from her elders. Well, minus the sacrifice of animals, in front of the public.”<sup>11</sup> Medina Martínez is a professional choreographer who directs a dance company that performs at a tourist hotel on the coast. His own work features modern dance “inspired by Haitian traditions” and he explains that it is possible to create accurate *fusiones* (fusions) of folkloric and contemporary dance, “but you can’t be inventing randomly, you can adapt but not fabricate, you have to understand the real thing.”<sup>12</sup> Economic, political, spiritual, and artistic decisions are made when people of Haitian heritage in Cuba choose how and where to perform their traditions publicly. Learning more about these choices can help us appreciate wider processes of cultural mixture, ethnic and national identification, and social mobility.

Folklorization is a process of adapting community-based social or religious events, making them suitable for the proscenium stage, heritage festivals, touristic venues, or transmuting them into educational instruments. In private or community settings, dances might last for hours or days, wax and wane between high and low energy segments, or orient towards participation rather than audience viewing. Adaptations can include making the dances more visually exciting, aesthetically embellished, or standardized. As traditions are re-constructed, how are they imagined to hold true to particular standards of authenticity or genuineness?

In Cuba, folklore in many forms is considered something “live” rather than a relic or bygone pursuit (Moore 2006a: 196). Although the state is explicitly secular and officially folklore performance is art, not spirituality, conceptions of authenticity nevertheless refer to belief or practice. Groups such as the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional or Haitian-Cuban dance groups base their authenticity on the fact that (at least some) members are also practitioners of the art forms or spiritual systems from which staged shows are adapted, or that choreographies

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<sup>11</sup> Interview conducted February 24, 2010, in Las Tunas, Cuba, my translation.

<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted February 24, 2010, in Las Tunas, Cuba, my translation.

were created with the help of *portadores* or “cultural stewards” who grew up with a tradition. Interviewing founders of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, dance ethnographer Jill Flanders Crosby found that their criteria for authenticity had focused on the company learning from informants who were “living referents” or “walking libraries” and whose “active and living practice of the religions” imbued them with the aesthetics of the form, giving a “validity” to the dances that simple replication of steps and moves could not (2007).

But folklore companies are also sites of innovation, where religion is adapted for the stage and spirituality becomes public pageant. Matory sheds light on discourses of authenticity set against processes of innovation. He probes the history of the Casa Branca, a Candomblé temple in the city of Salvador da Bahia in Brazil, a place of worship often heralded as one of the region’s “purest,” a temple where practitioners have diligently preserved ancient African rituals since the time of slavery. But pivotal figures in the temple’s history include a head priestess who, during the 1930s, updated the temple’s spiritual practices and repertoire with the help of a prosperous black seafaring trader. Traveling regularly to Lagos in West Africa, the merchant collected new rites, spiritual objects, and ritual knowledge, helping the priestess “re-Africanize” Casa Branca, and expanding its influence and renown as a site of authenticity and tradition, two generations after the end of slavery in Brazil (Matory 2005, see particularly 120-121 and 126-127). Matory alerts us that while claims to rustic authenticity and pure tradition may abound, his study of the “most traditional” temple of Candomblé in Bahia, Brazil, showed it to be more entwined in urban and transnational currents than rhetorics imply. Likewise, I highlight the role of actors who are broadening perceptions of Cuban national culture through a connection with Haiti that is both historical and imagined.

## Santiago: Provincial Cuba

Cuba has fourteen provinces, unofficially divided into three regions: *occidente* (the western region including Havana), the central part of the island, and *oriente* (the eastern provinces). At the very beginning of the colonial period, from 1522 to 1589, Santiago was Cuba's capital, but at the end of the sixteenth century the colony's commercial and administrative center shifted west to the port of Havana because it connected more directly with Spain's expanding colonies on the mainland. Afterwards, Santiago developed in a political, economic, and cultural matrix different from Havana. With a current population of almost half a million, Santiago de Cuba is the nation's second largest city.



Figure 2 – Santiago cityscape – ©Viddal 2008

Santiago is nestled at the end of a well-protected bay, with the Sierra Maestra mountains ringing the basin in which the city is located. The beautiful “casco historico” (historic shell) rises upward from the waterfront, with winding streets and antique houses decorated with lacey iron grillwork and thick wooden shutters. This “city of hills” is so steep that some streets, like the iconic Padre Pico, are literally formed as a staircase. Most tourists circulate near the smartly furnished Hotel Casa Grande and the museums and music venues that surround the central park, Parque Céspedes. From there, Santiago spreads out into neighborhoods, some with decades or centuries-old reputations. Los Olmos is the home of many *santeros* and musicians, Sueño is middle-class and quiet, Vista Alegre is the old neighborhood of the elite where former mansions

have become offices and institutes. Some *barrios*, like San Pedrito, immediately conjure visions of their famous carnival groups. Chicharrones, named after the fried pork rinds sold as an inexpensive snack, is referred to as a “marginal” or “popular” neighborhood. Since most houses are tiny and crowded, residents spill onto sidewalks and potholed streets, getting a haircut or a pedicure, peeling vegetables or cleaning rice, playing ball or dominos. Around Santiago’s perimeter, Soviet-inspired square, utilitarian, cement apartment buildings ring the city. Built in the 1970s, they house thousands of people and many have their own schools, clinics, youth centers, and food ration dispensing shops. Overcrowded and often delayed, buses chug from the outlying *districtos* to the city center. Unreliable transportation is a typical a source of consternation. For the more prosperous, motorcycles are the local taxi; any fellow driving a *moto* with an extra helmet slung on the handlebars is for hire, and fares cost 10 pesos (about 50 U.S. cents) from most parts of the city to another.

Associated with hot, humid weather, a languid pace of life, lilting dialect, flavorful carnival, and swinging music, Santiago represents for many Cubans the opposite of Havana’s bustle and commercialism. Old courtesies remain in daily use, as elderly denizens greet passerby by intoning “que Dios le bendiga” (“may God bless you”). Since colonial days, the city has been known for its *pregoneros*, ambulatory vendors who sing or call out their wares as they traverse residential neighborhoods. The eastern provinces of Santiago and Guantánamo are colloquially considered Cuba’s “blackest” provinces. Santiago is often overlooked in the distribution of resources, and even though it is Cuba’s “second city,” many *habaneros* (Havana residents) consider it a picturesque backwater. Santiago also historically has been typecast as a place with conservative provincial bureaucracy, crumbling infrastructure and neglected water, sewer, and

electrical grids.<sup>13</sup> When I conducted fieldwork in Santiago, electricity blackouts were common, as were rusted buses and frustrating transportation delays. An interminable bureaucracy surrounded many activities, from getting an ID card to opening a bank account. People generally spent hours every week standing in lines, waiting in offices, or searching for products or food items. Quotidian but inexplicable shortages are common throughout Cuba, including Havana, but they plague Santiago markedly. During a fifteen-month period while I lived in Santiago, consumables including deodorant, milk, toilet paper, and pasta disappeared from shops for weeks or months, as did foods such as garlic, onions, tomatoes, potatoes, and fruit, which periodically vanished from markets even when in season.

### *Oriente*

The city of Santiago has long been known as “la cuna de la Revolución” (the cradle of the Revolution) because both the nineteenth century wars for independence from Spain and the mid-twentieth century rebellion led by Fidel Castro against dictator Fulgencio Batista originated in the east. Historian Louis A. Pérez Jr. explains, “When Fidel Castro and his followers arrived in the Sierra Maestra in 1956, they stepped into a tradition of rebellion, however vague and ill-defined. They came upon armed struggle, they did not introduce it” (1995:292).

Literary theorist Peter Hulme calls *oriente* Cuba’s “wild east” (2011:1). He suggests that Cuba’s *oriente* shares reputed attributes with regions such as the south of Italy and the north of England: inaccessible mountains, economic underdevelopment, distance and distain from the locus of administration and power, and a reputation for an independent spirit. Hulme argues that capital cities can become “default” emblems of nationhood, or administration and foreign

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<sup>13</sup> Santiago also underwent a recent natural disaster, when hurricane Sandy damaged tens of thousands of buildings, destroyed harvests, and wrecked infrastructure on the evening on October 25, 2012. As of the writing of this dissertation, recovery is still slowly in process.



interests in colonial contexts. Outlying regions, on the other hand, become the country’s “metonyms for resistance, insurgence, or postcoloniality” (2011:6-7). Hulme articulates that because of its topography and its remoteness from Havana, *oriente* has been stereotyped as representative of backwardness and the provincial, as opposed to the modern and sophisticated. But, he notes, “when the city, civilization, and modernity become associated with colonialism, decadence, and corruption, then their opposites become sources of renewal, a role they have increasingly played in Cuba over the last 150 years” and explains that because of the revolutionary insurrections begun in its mountains, *oriente* has become “identified with revolutionary purity” (2011:7). He observes that Armando Hart, Cuba’s minister of Culture from 1976-1997, characterized *oriente* as “Cuba profunda” or “deep Cuba,” in other words, a locus of national authenticity that challenges Havana’s centrality (in Hulme 2011:9).<sup>14</sup>



Figure 3 – Map of Santiago and Guantánamo provinces – courtesy of C. Scott Walker  
Digital Cartography Specialist Harvard Library

<sup>14</sup> From: Armando Hart’s Prologue to Pedro Álvarez Tabío’s *Celia: Ensayo para una biographia*, Havana: Oficina de Publicaciones del Consejo de Estado, 2004:14.

Waves of migration from Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth/early nineteenth century and Haiti in the twentieth century not only distinguished *oriente* from *occidente*, but also helped define *cubanidad*, argues literary theorist Elzbieta Sklodowska (2009: 101). Despite ongoing cultural and socioeconomic ties throughout the centuries, Cuba's neighboring island crystalized in the Cuban literary and artistic imagination as an exotic "other" that helped define an "us," proposes Sklodowska. Stereotyping Haiti as a locus of blackness, revolutionary upheaval, and an exotic realm of Vodou, magic, and zombie legends, created a foil by which Cubans could be cast as comparatively modern, sanitary, enlightened, and democratic. Ambivalent images of Haiti, notes Sklodowska, mixed fascination and rejection, desire and denigration (2009:103).

*Oriente* as a whole has exemplified a different economic, political, and social history than Havana (Ferrer 1999:19). During the colonial period, sugar estates and tobacco farms marked western Cuba, while the east was more economically diverse and characterized by small land ownership and an autonomous spirit. Pérez explains, "The barriers of vast mountain chains, together with prevailing winds and ocean currents...served to isolate and insulate the east from the rest of the island. Oriente appeared too remote, the terrain too inhospitable, to justify large-scale settlement and extensive commercial exploitation...Oriente was Cuba's frontier" (1995:11). Participation in smuggling, contraband, and piracy was widespread, as colonists in the east, poorly supplied from Havana and unsupervised, had to rely on their own resources. From early on, illegal trade tied eastern Cuba with neighboring colonies such as French Saint-Domingue and English Jamaica (Pérez 1995:40, 47-48). Until the completion of a railroad connecting western and eastern Cuba in the early twentieth century, it took less travel time to travel by boat from Santiago to nearby islands than make a long overland trek to Havana (Wright 1912:354).

Pérez contends, “Havana and Santiago occupied sharply different places on the social continuum of colonial Cuba. From these two contrary points would emerge competing views of *cubanidad*, of what it meant to be Cuban. The west flourished as a result of the official presence, in defense of colonial policy; the east flourished as a result of the official absence, in defiance of colonial policy” (1995:41). Cuban intellectual Benítez-Rojo asserts that colonial Cuba was marked by a “Cuba Grande” and a “Cuba Pequeña.” The former was located in the west, dominated by sugar plantation owners, and tended to “reduce society to the requirements of production, technology and, above all, market demand” while the other, located in the east, “by contrast, looks inward, toward the land, and its cultural poles are formed by the diverse elements of folklore and tradition” (1986:15). This romanticizing of Cuba’s east as a font of purity, autonomy, and small land ownership is echoed by Pérez, who affirms,

Thus it was that Oriente developed as perhaps the most Cuban region of all of Cuba, less susceptible to outside influences, more committed to ways local and traditional. These factors contributed to making Oriente the source and site of recurring revolutionary stirrings. It was distant from authority, its communities were often inaccessible to authorities, and its residents were typically scornful of authority. It was in Oriente that Cuba’s principal revolutionary struggles originated, beginning with the wars for independence in the nineteenth century through the rebellion led by Fidel Castro in the 1950s (1995:12).

These characterizations of west/east still carry weight. After independence, in the early Republic, foreign investment under the U.S. client government created giant sugar plantations in the east, worked by cheap foreign labor, mainly Haitian migrants. This was a traumatic social transformation precisely because *oriente* had been a region of independent farmers, both white and black. The buy-up of land by foreigners for plantations under the pseudo-colonial republic lead to a proletarianization of society, as agricultural laborers became the primary workforce.

Imported Haitian labor fueled the new dominance of sugar plantations in *oriente* in the early twentieth century.

### Cuban Regionalism Today

Regional tensions have grown as a result of increased migration to Havana. Cubans from the provinces, particularly from *oriente*, seek better economic opportunities and expanded employment possibilities in the capital city. Alejandro de la Fuente reports that in an effort to stem Havana from being “overrun” by provincials, the government banned unauthorized migration to the capital in the spring of 1997, in response to the economic downturn after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, called the “Special Period” in Cuba (2001: 328). All Cubans must carry a *carnet* or ID card, which displays their legal residential address. While anyone can visit the capital for up to 60 days, permission to stay longer must be approved by authorities. Many people from the east, especially Santiago and Guantánamo, work illegally in the capital, particularly in building trades as itinerant bricklayers or carpenters, or as bicycle-taxi drivers, and remit money home to relatives in the provinces. In Cuba, the police can stop any passerby and demand to see their carnet. If the ID reveals a legal residence outside of Havana, the citizen can be questioned and eventually deported back to their home province. People from *oriente* are often referred to in Cuban slang as *palestinos* (Palestinians). While no one has been able to tell me when or how the term came into use, it seems to signify that people from the eastern provinces are “non-citizens” or “second-class citizens” in their own country. *Orientales* are not entitled to live in Havana without permission and can be subject to police scrutiny and harassment.

In a perceptive essay about regionalism in Cuban music, ethnomusicologist Rebecca Bodenheimer posits, “Despite the revolutionary government’s official rhetoric, which stresses national unity and celebrates the population’s total and ongoing dedication to socialist ideals of egalitarianism and cooperation, many Cubans cling tightly to their regional identities. This means not only a fierce loyalty to one’s province of birth, but often an explicit antagonism toward people from other provinces, particularly between Habaneros (people from Havana) and Orientales (people from the eastern provinces)” (2009:210).

Regionalism in Cuba belies the official discourse broadcast by the Cuban revolutionary socialist state. Authorities project an outward image of national unity in order to mitigate the ongoing political threat to the island’s sovereignty from the U.S.-led embargo. Bodenheimer argues that regionalism reveals shortcomings that chafe against the ideal of socialist egalitarianism (2009:24). Expressions of regional allegiance and ethnic fidelity, allowing for a multiplicity of categories of belonging, expose fissures within Cuban nationalist ideology.

### The Stage/Performance in Santiago

During the month of July, Santiago becomes a center of national attention as dance and musical groups showcase their work during the Festival del Caribe and Carnival. The Festival del Caribe is an international event sponsored by a cultural institution, the Casa del Caribe. It focuses on presenting both local and international culture to audiences during citywide festivities that span ten days each July. It is followed by Santiago’s Carnival, famous for its competitive neighborhood musical groups, called *congás*. While these groups parade down a wide avenue flanked by bleachers and a judges’ box on planned evenings, they also stage neighborhood “invasions” (*invasiones*) during which they march through the streets of Santiago, gathering

hundreds of followers, to a grand finale or “call out” challenging another *conga* to come out and prove their talent in front of their clubhouse or rehearsal space (*foco cultural*).<sup>15</sup>

City arts festivals, village processions, and private rituals all offer fertile environments in which to experience *haitiano-cubano* performance and traditions. Many local folkloric companies that specialize in *haitiano-cubano* repertoire participate in the Festival del Caribe, which focuses on presenting local and international folklore. They parade down the main avenues of the city, appear on stages in plazas and parks, engage in contests and competitions (such as “best song” or “best new choreography”) and offer demonstrations of Vodú rituals to the public (typically lead by a community elder). In addition to the Festival del Caribe in Santiago, I also traveled to similar smaller festivals showcasing *haitiano-cubano* culture in towns including Eva Gaspar en Memorium in Primero de Enero in Ciego de Ávila province and Encuentro Bwa Kayiman in San Germán in Holguín province, and Holy Week processions in the cane-growing villages of Thompson and Barrancas, both known for their preservation of Haitian traditions. Lastly, I attended Vodú parties and rituals sponsored by individuals and held in their homes.

In contrast to the larger citywide festivals, processions and dances associated with Holy Week in the villages of Thompson and Barrancas are organized by local families and take place on the village commons. Yet these also receive support from municipal arts programming offices. Furthermore, large events like the Festival del Caribe include open-to-the-public rituals in neighborhood-based or home temples. Thus, in Cuba, there is significant overlap between

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<sup>15</sup> There is a lively documentary in production about Santiago’s carnival, *Uprising Drums, Voice of Resistance*, created by the Melodius Thunk team of Blue Throat Productions. Clips of Santiago’s *congas* are available at: <http://www.bluthroatproductions.com/video/conga-series/>. See also “Towards an Understanding of Conga Santiaguera: Elements of La Conga de Los Hoyos” by Lani Milstein, forthcoming in *Latin American Music Review*, issue 34-2, November 2013.

“public” and “private” sponsorship of folklore performance events and between “secular” and “spiritual” venues.

## Research Timeline and Methodology

My interest in Caribbean performance arts and spirituality began with a passionate hobby: I loved Afro-Atlantic music and dance, particularly Cuban. As an undergraduate, searching for a form of exercise that welcomed all body types and featured great music, I discovered Caribbean and African folkloric dance classes. Smitten, I began to study with instructors and attend workshops in the Boston area where I lived, and other cities near and far. Over time, I became increasingly curious about the context and milieu of the dances I was learning. As we formed lines and moved across the sprung-wood floors of various dance studios or peered at ourselves in wall mirrors while executing step combinations, my teachers explained that our gestures were intended to celebrate harvests, communicate with the divine, heal infirmities, or mark rites of passage. How, I wondered, did these traditions arrive in dance studios and on theater stages? And what did these dances represent or signify when reconstructed in settings far from an African village compound or a Saint’s Day parade in the Caribbean? Reading and questioning, I found that social histories, political economies, and nation-building shaped the development of African and Caribbean music and dance genres. These performance arts could define community, express resistance, or celebrate nationhood.

Dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel describes Caribbean dance as having the power to “ignite citizenship” and asserts, “Even though dance comes from the aesthetic domain of social life, it contains strong links to political, religious, and even economic domains...Dance is play, but not simply play” (2011:1). She continues:

Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora performers dance freedom, creativity, and spontaneity regularly, but also—routinely—contestation and opposition, because their freedom has rarely been guaranteed...As the enslaved on plantations, as free workers in segregated nation states, and as official citizens living with prejudice and unofficial restrictions on civil and other rights, their circumstances have rarely satisfied their yearnings for genuine equality. Through dance, they have regularly challenged those in power to relax, share, and spread the well-being of the dance, and in return they have presumed reciprocity; a mutual exchange of well-being in exchange for a sense of citizenship. In the moments of the dance, feelings of belonging are generated and solidarity is affirmed, even if temporarily; in the moments of the dance, feelings of fierce self-worth, strength, and rebellion are also activated” (2011:193).

Judith Bettelheim similarly observes that public performance is a space in which Caribbean dancers continually assert presence and reclaim heritage, which “speaks to an ongoing system of survival and self-rule, subsumed under the rubric of a national folklore agenda” (2007:13).

In 1998 I heard about a dance program in Cuba. Determined to go despite the convoluted regulations surrounding travel, I ultimately found myself in Santiago de Cuba together with a dozen other foreigners, relishing two-weeks of dance classes hosted by Ballet Folklórico de Cutumba, a professional performance troupe specializing in the dances of eastern Cuba. It was one of my first opportunities to see traditional dance in its primary environment. Or was it? Like other folkloric groups, Cutumba’s repertoire included choreographed and staged interpretations of sacred rituals. I wondered how public performance and spiritual traditions interfaced in Cuba. Whenever my finances permitted, I returned to Cuba, visiting different regions of the island to meet performers and religious practitioners, and, when invited to do so, photographing and videotaping public performances, community ceremonies, and personal rituals.

I made my first trip to Haiti in 2002, when I participated in a dance program at a cultural center founded by Dr. Gerdès Fleurant in the provincial city of Mirebalais. Fleurant, an ethnomusicologist, encourages the study of Haitian music, dance, and culture. The parallels I



witnessed between Haitian and Cuban performance idioms were intriguing, and I returned to Haiti on subsequent occasions, taking classes with folklore instructors and attending Vodou events.

My dance towards graduate school lasted many years, but I ultimately entered a program in African and African American Studies at Harvard University, where I decided to focus my dissertation research on the Haitian diaspora in Cuba, bridging my fascination with both islands' performance traditions. During my core period of fieldwork, I lived in Santiago for fifteen months between 2008 and 2010. For the first ten months, I lived in the historic center city and rented a room from an active priestess of Santería who was also a business owner (the bed & breakfast in which I lived) and a scholar who researched the history of women in the Santería religion. During a second five-month fieldwork period, I rented an apartment farther from the touristic hubbub of downtown, living in the Vista Alegre neighborhood not far from the Casa del

Caribe cultural research institute.

While based in Santiago, I visited other cities and towns that hosted Haitian heritage festivals and made trips to villages known for their Haitian-descended populations. I also spent time in Havana. Although eastern Cuba is the primary locus of *haitiano-cubano* culture, the search for economic opportunity has prompted



Figure 4 – My home in Santiago's historic center. The family car is parked in front. ©Viddal 2008

a number of Haitian-Cuban folkloric dance companies to relocate to the capital. Also, Havana is home to several cultural organizations that focus on Cuba's Haitian legacy, including Bannzil Kiba Kreyol and the Martha Jean-Claude Foundation.<sup>16</sup>

My fieldwork strategy consisted primarily of participant-observation, or “deep hanging out.” I passed hours watching both amateur and professional folkloric troupes’ rehearsals and performances. Sweating, snoozing, drinking rum, and chatting, I accompanied troupes on long bus trips to shows and festivals in other provinces, punctuated by interminable waits for gasoline chits to be authorized or dusty sojourns on highway shoulders as the driver disappeared under the hood to coax a cranky carburetor. I eventually learned to deliver the punch line of a joke in Spanish successfully and how to dodge scams that resulted in my paying for *all* the rum. I glimpsed the daily struggles, financial worries, social and political attitudes, goals, aesthetic criteria, and spiritual orientations of the drummers, dancers, singers, and culture bureaucrats that populated a folkloric company. I spent time interviewing choreographers, founders, and directors regarding their troupe’s mission and history. I met their families. I got invited to their birthday parties and their “cumpleaños de santo” or “religious birthdays”—the festivities held (financial solvency permitting) on the anniversary of their spiritual initiation. Sometimes, a whole dance company threw a party for the spirits in order to comply with promises made in exchange for divine support or simply to honor the spirits and bring luck, health, and prosperity.

In the eastern cities, the religions of initiation that motivated the many “cumpleaños de santo” that I attended included included Santería/Regla de Ocha, Regla de Palo, and less

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<sup>16</sup> Bannzil Kiba Kreyol, founded in 1998 by radio journalist Hilario Batista, gathers researchers, performers, cultural activists for biennial conferences and festivals that promote Creole language and culture. Martha Jean-Claude was a celebrated singer who began her career in Port-au-Prince in the 1940s. She later fled to Cuba to escape political persecution, and continued her career there. Her son, Richard Mirabal, director of the Martha Jean-Claude Foundation, produced a documentary about her life, *Mujer de dos islas* (1993), in conjunction with Cuban television and Crowing Rooster Arts.

frequently, Vodú. In rural communities of primarily Haitian descendants, Vodú predominated, sometimes mixed with Spiritism. I was also invited to highland gatherings of devotees of Bembe de Saõ, regarded locally as an array of “country” or “backwoods” spiritual practices that blend varied African-inspired spiritual systems such as Spiritism, Folk Catholicism, Palo, Santería/Ocha, and sometimes Vodú. While at first I focused on finding “genuine” Vodú in Cuba, I soon found that Cubans of all backgrounds mixed and molded different systems, and that fluid and hybrid practices were in fact the norm, particularly among the poorest. In the city, initiating into some of the increasingly standardized spiritual systems such as Ifá divination (associated with western Cuba but spreading east) is costly. In the countryside, I found that it was the more prosperous who had the resources to keep the Vodú traditions of their grandparents “pure” or “unmixed” by buying only the correct sacrificial animals and items (for example a black rooster as opposed to any rooster, or being able to offer the bull spirit Togo something as costly as a calf), hiring the finest drummers who knew the old rhythms flawlessly, or keeping partygoers, musicians, and singers sustained with lodging, food, and drink long enough to deliver the full repertoire of songs, chants, and flag processions, as I discuss in Chapters Three and Five.

At the time of my fieldwork, the city of Santiago possessed two professional folklore companies and a number of amateur-status groups. Both the professionals and part-timers staged arrangements based on a variety of traditions, including Cuban rumba or couple dances such as *chachacha*. Most made a point to showcase dances local to *oriente*, including those associated with the area’s Haitian legacy. For this, they retained or commissioned a specialist to choreograph the repertoire and train percussionists. Folkloric troupes whose members consisted largely of people of Haitian descent, considered *portadores* or “cultural stewards” for whom the traditions were “live,” existed in the countryside but not in the city. To spend time with rural

*portadores* and observe their rehearsals and Vodú events, I embarked (accompanied by Cuban friends) on arduous rides in the flat bed trucks that serve as buses on unpaved country roads, or made hairy ascents into the mountains in the relative luxury of the Casa del Caribe's bare-bones Chinese jeep. Because I had developed a relationship with the Casa del Caribe over several years, the institution kindly invited me along when its own researchers headed into the hills or allowed me to sponsor trips at will by filling the gasoline tank. During one trip, the gasket of the jeep's overflow brake fluid well (itself an "invention" made from an upended plastic vitamin bottle) disintegrated. After we searched vainly along the side of the road for a piece of tire or an abandoned rubber sandal from which to cut a new gasket, I realized that I had a pack of chewing gum in my purse. We set to masticating and quickly had a functional gasket that in fact lasted for weeks. On another occasion, when the jeep punctured a tire for the third time on a particularly rocky mountain trail, we used my lighter to melt a condom offered by a helpful local farmer to create a serviceable tire plug. My Cuban colleagues and friends were patient with my resulting "Indiana Jones complex." What for me were demanding adventures that I felt proud to have weathered were for them simply the quotidian challenges of rural transportation.

At first I believed I would find a divide between *haitiano-cubano* traditions performed by dance troupes versus customs maintained by families or small communities. But I found that I had to re-think my ideas about authenticity and the role of sponsorship of ritual activities. The circulation of cultural promoters, academics, and state officials in the world of Vodú is not uncommon, and practitioners often pursue patronage for rituals and events. Practitioners' standards of "authenticity" did *not* entail avoiding or shunning the presence or financial support of researchers or culture bureaucrats at their spirit parties. Instead, I found that everyone was

welcomed at Vodú events and that the presence of a television crew or the Minister of Culture was in fact perceived to protect and bolster the religion rather than dilute or commercialize it.

The Casa del Caribe, Santiago's leading cultural research institute, has long been a seminal patron for many *haitiano-cubano* performance groups and ritual specialists, so I describe more of its history in Chapter Three. During my time in Santiago, I attended many festivals and events sponsored by the Casa del Caribe, joined its weekly research team meetings, spent hours conversing with its associated anthropologists, historians, and event producers, copied its journal *Del Caribe* in the library, and conducted interviews with its director, artistic director, and journal editor. Conferring with staff from additional institutions such as the Casa de Africa/Centro Fernando Ortiz, the City Historian's Office, and the Provincial Arts Council helped me situate the Casa del Caribe's role and reputation in provincial and national circles and among Cuban intellectuals.

Casa del Caribe founding researcher Alexis Alarcón, one of the co-authors of the monograph *el Vodú en Cuba*, was attentively involved in my project. His introductions to people in *haitiano-cubano* communities and thoughtful commentary on my field notes were rich sources of ideas and insights. Historian and editor of *Del Caribe* Julio Corbea also guided my research. Some years before I started my main period of fieldwork, a Cuban-American percussionist who was well acquainted with Santiago's music scene mentioned that he knew someone who he thought would make a great field assistant. Antonio "Antuan" Mejías Limonta, the son of a famous local drummer of Haitian descent, was at the time making ends meet as an instrument maker and part-time folkloric performer who occasionally gave private classes to foreigners hooked on Cuban music. Antonio was punctual, professional, and knowledgeable. He quickly grasped the mindset and objectives of anthropological fieldwork, and became a pivotal figure

guiding my research in eastern Cuba, gradually shifting over the years from field assistant to lifelong friend and colleague.<sup>17</sup> Together, we visited Vodú leaders and ritual specialists in towns and villages in eastern Cuba including Felton, Cueto, Contramaestre, La Clarita, Palma Soriano, Pílon del Cauto, Las Tunas, Ramón de Guaninao, Thompson, and Barrancas.

Many of these Vodú practitioners and their families had hosted researchers from the Casa del Caribe or actively worked with municipal culture offices, often as members of folkloric groups. A few had no significant contacts with academics or culture bureaucracies and focused solely on their consulting and healing business, local congregation, or on personal and familial worship. To get a sense of the range of Haitian identification, Antonio and I also visited people who claimed more tangential connections to Vodú or to Haitian culture, such as Spiritist mediums who channeled “an elderly Haitian slave” when in trance or Palo priests who kept a *prenda* (a ritual cauldron serving as an energy magnetizer and device for divine communication) with ingredients proclaimed to be “Haitian magic.” Lastly, I located and talked with ordinary residents with some known Haitian ancestry, to get a sense of whether upholding customs from their ethnic background was part of their self-image.

In summary, in order to understand how “Haitianness” figured and functioned within larger Cuban society, my ethnographic research into *haitiano-cubano* identification focused on three different ambits: folkloric performers, Vodú believers, and the institutions, scholars, and culture brokers that interacted with them. I also looked for instances of “performances of Haitianness” in Cuban society at large, particularly among practitioners of belief systems not

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<sup>17</sup> In 2010, Antonio decided to become an accredited ethnographer and enrolled in university. As of the writing of this dissertation, he has finished an undergraduate degree in Art History, has begun a Masters program in Caribbean Studies, and is slated to become a member of the Casa del Caribe’s research staff, specializing in Haitian heritage art forms and religious practices.

identified as Vodú and amid people of some Haitian ancestry who had not grown up in Haitian enclaves.

### The Allure of the French

There have been two principal waves of migration from what is now Haiti to eastern Cuba. From 1791 to 1804, as instability and violence consumed the French colony of Saint-Domingue in the years of the Haitian Revolution, tens of thousands of refugees fled to eastern Cuba, giving the cities of Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo their reputed “French” flavor. Over a century later, during the initial decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of sugar cane cutters—the majority of them Haitians—were recruited as workhands for the expanding sugar industry of the newly independent Cuban republic, and many settled permanently in Cuba. The second wave of migration was considerably larger, and more recent, than the first. But there is an additional noteworthy difference between the two migrations. While much has been written about the refugees from Saint-Domingue, the Haitian migrant laborers have fallen into what historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot called a “silencing” of the past (1995). The second wave of migration has received much less attention from scholars, heritage bureaus, the media, or culture promoters. This section explores why the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century migration from Saint-Domingue has been more alluring to researchers, intellectuals, and culture publicists than the much bigger twentieth century migration from Haiti.

In 1804 the French colony of Saint-Domingue became Haiti, the western hemisphere’s first independent black republic. Saint-Domingue was a brutal and prosperous colony that vastly enriched the coffers of the French empire until a slave insurrection in 1791 spread across the country, eventually defeating even Napoleon’s armies sent to crush it. As war engulfed Saint-

Domingue in the years leading up to 1804, much of the French plantocracy fled, some with household members including their domestic servants or slaves.<sup>18</sup> Many *affranchis*, a wealthy mixed-race class, also left the colony. Professionals, tradespeople, artisans, and maritime workers, including whites, mulattos, and free blacks joined the surge of migrants. A large portion re-settled in Cuba's *oriente*, at the time a "rustic" backwater far from the capital of Havana, because of its proximity to Haiti and the low prices of land in the eastern provinces, (Cruz Ríos 2006:30).

Estimates of the number of migrants varies widely, with Pérez de la Riva putting the figure at 30,000 (1975), Cruz Ríos calculating 27,000 (2006) and Iglesias Utset positing 18,000 (2011). Determining the size of the exodus from Saint-Domingue to Cuba is complicated by the chaos surrounding the flight, confusion about the status of slaves, and subsequent events that provoked another surge of resettlement. While some of the earlier migrants came in a more orderly fashion and with capital to invest, those fleeing the destruction of the colony on the cusp of the Haitian Revolution in 1803 arrived in waves that overwhelmed the port cities of Santiago, Guantánamo, and Baracoa in eastern Cuba (Cruz Ríos 2006:40, 52-53). Iglesias Utset speculates that some legally free black refugees were immediately re-enslaved in Cuba and perhaps sold quickly to off-island buyers (2011:68). Not long thereafter, another flood of resettlement was provoked by the outbreak of war between France and Spain in 1808, when an expulsion order compelled French citizens residing in Spanish territories to swear allegiance to the Spanish

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<sup>18</sup> Emancipation was declared in the French colonies in 1794. However, to protect Saint-Domingue's economic yield, the freedom of movement of former slaves was curtailed by regulations forcing many to remain on plantations as laborers. Under Napoleon's regime, troops attempted but failed to re-instate slavery in 1802 and 1803 (Dubois 2004:161-170). Technically, black domestics accompanying refugees who disembarked in Cuba would have been legally free. But, notes Cuban historian Marial Iglesias Utset, their status, as well as that of other free persons of color, may have been subject to reevaluation once on Cuban soil, where emancipation did not ensue until much later (in 1886) and some were likely re-enslaved (personal conversation March 3, 2013, see also Iglesias Utset 2011:86).



crown or depart. Many former planters moved again, this time to New Orleans, doubling that city's population in 1809 (Cruz Ríos 2006, Sublette 2008:252).

Recruited in the early twentieth century as a cheap source of labor for the growing sugar industry, the second wave migrants were agricultural laborers. Once more, verifying the quantity of migrants is problematic, and again, later political events prompted another exodus. Sugar company recruiters paid bribes to port authorities to circumvent immigration fees and policies (Lundahl 1982:29), which foiled attempts at record-keeping. Some Haitians worked for a season then returned, or made multiple trips, making it difficult to determine how many settled permanently in Cuba. Later, during the worldwide economic downturn of the 1930s, thousands of Haitians were forcibly repatriated, further complicating calculations of their presence in Cuba. Scholarly estimations of the second wave of migration from Haiti to Cuba thus ranges from less than 200,000 to more than 600,000.<sup>19</sup>

The saga of colonists fleeing for their lives during a bloody slave insurrection has received more scholarly attention than the tale of impoverished Haitian cane cutters migrating to Cuba for work opportunities during the twentieth century, so the history and contributions of the second wave of migrants fall into a lacunae. Below, I summarize the history of Saint-Domingue migration and the long-lasting fascination with Santiago's "French" legacy.

The arrival tens of thousands of *franceses*, as the colonists from Saint-Domingue were called, transformed the city of Santiago. They introduced new styles of cuisine, art, and music, opened schools and academies, theaters, pharmacies, and bakeries, and they brought professional

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<sup>19</sup> Scholars including Alvarez Estévez (1988), Carr (1998), de la Fuente (2001), and Casey (2012), using the statistics gathered by port authorities in Cuba and Haiti, estimate numbers of migrants at between 200,000 and 300,000. Other historians including Pérez de la Riva (1979) and McLeod (2000) hypothesize that more than half of the migrants entered illegally, avoiding becoming part of official statistics, and so postulate higher figures. James, Millet, and Alarcón (2007) base their assessment of half a million on calculating the number of workers necessary for recorded sugar harvests during the period.

skills in engineering and agriculture, city planning, construction, design, ornamental ironwork and other decorative arts (Orozco Melgar 2002). Cuban historian Pérez de la Riva asserts that this avalanche of refugees converted Santiago de Cuba from a country town into a cosmopolitan city “almost from one day to the next” (1979:23). The once “primitive” and “lethargic” Santiago was now home to unemployed winemakers, tailors, and pastry chefs, as well as machinists, urban craftspeople, former functionaries, doctors, and merchants (see Pérez de la Riva 1975:371, Orozco Melgar 2002, Cruz Rios 2006:35). Historian Jacqueline Grant explains, “Cuban *criollos* in the nineteenth century held French style and culture as standards of a progressive and civilized society” and observes that migrants from Saint-Domingue took advantage of the Cuban attraction to French customs and expertise, opening schools of dance and music, restaurants, and guest houses and offering language classes and professional services (2012:171, 189). Grant explains that Saint-Domingue elites “lost no time in creating a cultural environment in Santiago de Cuba that enabled them to continue many of the social activities they had practiced in Saint-Domingue” (2012: 187). The wave of migration from Saint-Domingue has loomed large in the regional imagination because it is associated with “civilization” and “refinement” and also technical skills and business acumen, a legacy that inspires Santiaguera pride in the heritage of their “French” city.

In the years following migration, during the first quarter of nineteenth century, former members of Saint-Domingue’s colonial elite purchased land and established hundreds of coffee plantations, or *cafetales*, in the hills and mountains surrounding Santiago. Using skills new in Cuba such as hydraulically engineered irrigation systems, they inaugurated a new and very profitable political economy in eastern Cuba (Pérez de la Riva 1975:378-389, Duharte Jiménez 1987). French and French Creole were the lingua franca of the *cafetales*, which operated in a

sphere apart from the Spanish-speaking locality (Iglesias Utset 2011:91). The coffee plantations became famous as sites of shady gardens, elegant parties, and cultural activities in Parisian style (Millet and Brea 1989:19-20, Orozco Melgar 2002:40-41, Sublette 2004:117).

The Saint-Domingans enjoyed a repertoire of ballroom dances. Black *franceses* on the *cafetales* set these to drum rhythms, fusing European courtly dances with African style percussive music, and creating their own “Tumba Francesa” or “French Drum” (Cruz Ríos 2004:24, 2005, Alén 1991). While city-based black *franceses* likely also savored various salon dances, the genesis of the Tumba Francesa is associated with rural slaves on the francophone coffee plantations. While some migrants of means who left Saint-Domingue brought along trusted household domestics, most enslaved individuals on the *cafetales* were purchased in Cuba over time, as the coffee growers acquired land and built plantations. Some of these slaves were African-born, most often “Congos” from Central Africa. Others were likely acquired through the clandestine intra-Caribbean slave trade. Iglesias Utset, Cruz Ríos, and Alén all speculate that while the slaves who danced the Tumba Francesa may have identified as “French” because they resided in the sphere of the francophone plantations, many had never lived in the French colony of Saint-Domingue.<sup>20</sup> In interviews conducted by Cruz Ríos, descendants of founding members of Tumba Francesa societies emphasized that their ancestors were African-born slaves on French-owned coffee plantations who spoke *patua* or French Creole but did not come from Saint-Domingue (2005). The Tumba Francesa, a “French” dance, formed in Cuba, largely by African slaves, is fascinating example of a kind of “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm 1983).

In Cuban cities, enslaved and free blacks gathered for mutual aid and cultural expression in *cabildos*, social organizations active in Cuba since the early colonial period. After

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<sup>20</sup> Personal conversations with Alén in January 2005 and 2006, Iglesias Utset on February 20 and May 24, 2013, and Cruz Ríos on May 26, 2013.

Emancipation in Cuba (in 1886) many former slaves migrated from rural to urban areas, and the official incorporation of a number of such mutual aid and recreation clubs founded by families of black *franceses* leaving the coffee plantations date to this era. They became known as Tumba Francesa societies, after the dances held there (Alén 1991). While the ballroom dances of the eighteenth century faded from the salons of affluent whites, they remained a tradition among members of the Tumba Francesa societies. Grant surmises that “the *francesas* of color may have held onto performative activities that recalled their French Creole traditions as a way of highlighting their affiliation with France and therefore with a culture that Cuban *criollos* held in high regard” (Grant 2012:188).

Three Tumba Francesa groups still exist today in eastern Cuba: Santa Catalina de Riccis, also known as La Pompadour, in Guantánamo, La Caridad de Oriente, formerly Société Lafayette, in Santiago, and a small rural group in the village of Bejuco in Holguín province. In 2003, all three were declared part of the “Intangible Cultural Heritage” of humanity, a cultural preservation program sponsored by UNESCO working in conjunction with national governments. The buildings that currently house La Caridad and Santa Catalina were renovated and made more accessible to school groups, cultural promoters, and tourists through didactic brochures, media attention, and the scheduling of rehearsals for public viewing.



Figure 5 – Tumba Francesa la Pompadour performing at a UNESCO-sponsored event ©Viddal 2009

While the refugees from Saint-Domingue ranged in economic condition and racial position, the twentieth century migrants from Haiti were much more homogenous. The vast majority were black agricultural laborers (Pérez de la Riva 1975, 1979). They brought to Cuba dance and music traditions, such as Holy Week processions known as “Gagá,” and spiritual practices today termed “Vodú.” Many scholars, journalists, and cultural performers and promoters fail to distinguish the two waves of migrants, often attributing the Tumba Francesa to the Haitian cane cutters.

Examples of the silenced history of twentieth century Haitian migration to Cuba are pervasive. Attending the joint conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology and the Congress on Dance Research in Philadelphia in November of 2011, I introduced myself to an ethnomusicologist specializing in Cuban music. Explaining that my research focused on people of Haitian heritage in Cuba, he exclaimed, “Oh, yes, Haitians in Cuba, I know about that, the Tumba Francesa!” The perception that Tumba Francesa represents Haitian migration to Cuba is

ubiquitous, even among Cuba-specialists, and is not limited to scholars. A professional dancer in a folkloric troupe in Santiago—who could execute the steps of both Tumba Francesa and Gagá beautifully—completely erased the existence of the twentieth century Haitian migrants when she lectured me on dance history by explaining that both traditions arrived in Cuba with “slaves from the Haitian Revolution.” During their 2011 North American tour, the Creole Choir of Cuba were featured in articles and reviewed in newspapers and on websites that persistently conflated their ancestry with Saint-Domingue refugees even though members are all descendants of Haitian cane cutters. The choir’s own recording label, Real World Records, describes members’ families as “tricked into second slavery [in Cuba] by their French masters after the Haitian Revolution of 1790.”<sup>21</sup> When National Public Radio featured the choir in a story, reporters glossed their heritage as dating “back to the late 18th century, when slaves from Haiti were delivered to Cuba ... after successful slave revolts in Haiti.”<sup>22</sup> Widespread obliviousness to Cuba’s Haitian heritage frustrates the choir’s director Emilia Diaz Chavez. But, she sighed during a post-performance conversation as I read aloud the sponsoring university’s announcement publicizing the concert, she is used to it.<sup>23</sup>

A recent book about spiritual practices in eastern Cuba (Dodson 2008) devotes a chapter to Vodú and features a photo of a drummer playing for a Vodú ritual event in the town of Las Tunas. The caption identifies the instruments as “Tumba Francesa drums” even though Tumba Francesa music and dance is no way linked to the Vodú practices brought more than a century later by Haitian laborers. Members of Tumba Francesa societies themselves have persistently

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<sup>21</sup> See: <https://realworldrecords.com/artist/3417/the-creole-choir-of-cuba/>

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://www.npr.org/event/music/146280449/the-creole-choir-of-cuba-tiny-desk-concert>

<sup>23</sup> Conversation October 11, 2011, in Hadley, Massachusetts.

emphasized that they represent a French—not Haitian—legacy. In a conversation on August 11, 2007, Fredy Fernández Brooks, current president of the Tumba Francesa in Guantánamo, explained to me that La Pompadour preserved “Franco-Antillean” traditions, and although they shared rehearsal space with another group (Los Cosia) specifically devoted to “Haitian” dance, he clarified that he did not consider the Tumba Francesa to be “Haitian.” Boudreault-Fournier, in her documentary about La Pompadour and the Haitian presence in Guantánamo also noticed that the Tumba Francesa and Los Cosia seemed to consider themselves distantly related but quite distinct (2003). Cruz Ríos related that together with members of the Casa del Caribe ethnographic research team, she tried, but failed, to find any links between the Tumba Francesa society of Santiago and practices associated with Vodú.<sup>24</sup> Art historian Judith Bettelheim, working with local cultural chronicler Gladys Gonzalez Bueno, theorizes that while historical sources associate the Creole-speaking slaves who left the francophone coffee plantations to join the guerrilla insurgents during the nineteenth century Cuban wars of independence with African beliefs and powerful “magic of the mountains,” categorizing this as Vodú is difficult (2001:144,147).

The “French” influence on the city of Santiago and eastern Cuba has been the focus of books and articles, academic colloquiums, documentaries and television specials, and an annotated bibliography.<sup>25</sup> The Alianza Francesa (a French diplomatic and cultural institute with offices in Santiago and Havana) has funded brochures, sponsored conferences, and helped arrange conventions between the universities of Bordeaux and Le Havre in France and Universidad de Oriente in Santiago. On the other hand, scholarly research and media attention

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<sup>24</sup> Personal conversation May 26, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Some noted scholars who have published on the topic include Pérez de la Riva (1975), Berenguer (1979), Boytel Jambú (1987), Duharte (1987, 1988), Cremé (1988), Yacou (1993), Portuondo (1991, 1996), Orozco (2002), Cruz Rios (2004, 2005, 2006) and Renault (2012). The bibliography is by Amaro Cano.

dedicated to the contributions of Haitian cane cutters and their descendants is comparatively sparse, although there are some important exceptions, which I shall discuss in the next section. Santiago's "French" heritage, while fascinating and compelling, is not the focus of this dissertation. Instead, my goal is to illuminate some of Cuba's Haitian heritage, adding to the available body of work on the topic.

### Scholarship on the Haitian Diaspora in Cuba

Fernando Ortiz, "the father of Cuban ethnography" became one of the island's most recognized twentieth-century intellectuals: a prolific writer, jurist, ethnographer, musicologist, and social theorist. He began his career as a criminologist influenced by the theories of Cesare Lombroso, studying the behavior and characteristics of lawbreakers in Havana's criminal records. Ortiz focused particularly on blacks, theorizing that so-called "African atavisms," including superstitious religious beliefs, primitive reasoning, and poor education, led to anti-social behavior and crime, publishing the results of his research in *Hampa afro-cubana: los negros brujos* (Afrocuban Underworld: the Black Sorcerers) in 1906 (Ayorinde 2004:44-47). Ortiz' thinking shifted over time, moving away from his initial racist perspective (Moore 1994). He became increasingly captivated by black Cuban culture, particularly music and spiritual belief systems. From the 1920s through the 1950s, Ortiz published volumes on black music and arts, founded the journals "Archivos del Folklore Cubano" and "Estudios Afrocubanos," and invited members of Afrocuban religious houses and temples to perform their ritual music on stage for the general public during anthropological lectures (Hagedorn 2001:191-194, Ayorinde 2004:56-60).



Ortiz conducted research principally in the Havana area and western Cuba. He focused on contributions brought by African slaves, arguing that these cultural forms were an important component of Cuban national identity. The arrival of waves of Haitian cane cutters and coffee pickers between the 1910s and 1930s occurred around the same time that Ortiz and the ethnographers he trained began to publish the results of their research. At the time, Haitians were still considered foreigners who were not part of the national *ajiaco* or “ethnic stew;” they were “other” to the Cuban national body. As such, they were not the focus of Ortiz’ attention. But by the 1950s, many Haitians had lived in Cuba for a generation. Brief mentions of their music and belief systems begin to appear in Ortiz’ later work. For example, he describes musical instruments found in *haitiano-cubano* communities in the Camagüey and Santiago areas in *Los instrumentos de la musica afrocubana* (1955: Vol. III: 356-357, 361, Vol. V: 304-306). Ortiz also described Tumba Francesa music and dance in *Los instrumentos* and in photo-essays in *Bohemia* (1949, 1951). Both Ortiz and his most noted contemporary, the ethnographer Rómulo Lachatañeré, focused on revealing the cultural mores, art forms, and spiritual practices brought by diverse African ethnic groups. Both worked primarily in western areas of the island, and carried out much of their research before the waves of Haitian laborers settled in *oriente*.<sup>26</sup>

The seminal generation of Cuban ethnographers trained by Ortiz—including Lydia Cabrera, Argeliers Léon, Rogelio Martínez Furé, and Miguel Barnet—were also largely Havana-based and focused. One notable exception is Alberto Pedro Díaz, who published two monographs about Haitian-Cuban enclaves in Camagüey province in *Etnología y Folklore* in 1966 and 1967. The first essay examines history, social structure, and customs in a sugar factory

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<sup>26</sup> Lachatañeré was born in Santiago. Although his research was largely Havana-based, he conducted a year of fieldwork in his natal city around 1936-1937. There, he found emerging communities of practitioners of Santería led by the charismatic Reynerio Pérez, a *santero* who had relocated from Havana some years earlier. Vignettes of his encounters with Pérez appear in *Manual de Santería* (2007: 40-42), see also Wirtz (2007:53-59).

workers' village tenanted by Haitians and their families, and the latter details their dearly-held music and dance traditions enacted during Holy Week. Although Elzbieta Sklodowska finds that both the Instituto de Etnología y Folklore and the Academia de Ciencias Sociales (both located in Havana) identified Antillean immigrants as a subject for ethnographic projects during the 1960s, I have been unable to locate any further published work from the period (2009:105).

After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the new socialist regime's expanding support for arts, culture, and performance led to the formation of many new folkloric dance and music troupes under the *aficionado* or "amateurs" movement. Some Haitian heritage communities took advantage of these programs and officialized neighborhood or village performance groups in order to receive support under the *Casa de Cultura* system of municipal culture bureaus.<sup>27</sup> Also, some professional folklore companies searching for novel choreographies began to study *haitiano-cubano* dances.<sup>28</sup> But while the dance and music of Cuba's Haitian heritage communities began to appear on stages during state-sponsored events, little was published about *haitiano-cubano* traditions. Rather, the aim was performance.

It was not until the publication of several seminal works that Cuba's Haitian heritage communities were examined more fully. Jesus Guanche and Denis Moreno published *Caidije* in 1988, an ethnography detailing lifeways and traditions in Caidije, a workers' village near a large sugar mill in Camagüey province in eastern Cuba. The monograph describes migration history, the sex ratios and demographics of the laborers, economic strategies, household industries, food

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<sup>27</sup> Village or neighborhoods groups (many already existing for years or decades) that officially incorporated under the *Casa de Cultura* system include Bonito Patuá in 1974 (see Gonzalez Bello 1987), Petit Dancé of Las Tunas in 1976 (interview with Rosario Quintana Matos February 24, 2010), and Caidije in 1978 (see Cepero Recorder 2012:19). For more on the *aficionado* movement, see Millet and Brea (1989:92-94) Moore (2006:85-90), and Cepero Recorder (2012:18-19).

<sup>28</sup> Interviews with Antonio Pérez Martínez on December 15, 2008, and April 29, 2009, and Feliz Navarro Navarro on June 5, 2011. See Chapter Three for more details.

preparation, religion, funeral rites, and holiday celebrations. It includes detailed drawings of material culture and customs such as hair braiding styles, handmade furniture, tools, and thatched-roof construction techniques. It exemplifies an anthropological approach emphasizing description of the customs of remote or little-known communities and the recording of vanishing lifeways.

Based on a decade of fieldwork by a team of musicologists, CIDMUC, the Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Música Cubana (Center for Research and Development of Cuban Music) published *Instrumentos de la Música Folclórico-Popular de Cuba* in 1997. The two-volume tome and atlas includes sections on musical instruments found in Haitian heritage communities in Cuba. Many musicologists and ethnographers in Cuba studied in universities in the former Soviet bloc, where training emphasized a narrowly methodical and descriptive approach to cultural study, generally treating social phenomena as stable and measurable. The CIDMUC atlas stresses the taxonomy of musical instruments and classification of genres, but also includes some discussion of historical and social context. Also, musicologist Martha Esquenazi Pérez, associated with the Centro Juan Marinello social research institute in Havana, collected songs and folktales in *haitiano-cubano* enclaves in Cuba and published several essays about Haitian oral tradition in Cuba (1989, 1991, 2001, 2002).

The only book-length monograph about Haitian spiritual practices in Cuba, *el Vodú en Cuba*, was authored by a team of ethnographers from the Casa del Caribe institute in Santiago: James, Millet, and Alarcón (first published in 1992 with subsequent editions in 1998 and 2007). Also the product of a decade of research, *el Vodú en Cuba* focuses on religion but also delves into migration history, customs, family structure, and social relations, and proposes theories of national identity formation in both Haiti and Cuba. Joel James Figarola, the founder of the Casa

del Caribe, was a pioneering figure arguing that Haitian migrants were an important element in Cuba's "ethnic stew." Eastern Cuba's Haitian legacy became an important area of research for the Casa, as we shall see in Chapter Three.

Several economic histories of Cuba reference Haitians, but often mention those migrant laborers who fueled Cuba's postcolonial sugar expansion only tangentially, in the context of profit strategies, labor activism, or policy and laws governing guest workers and foreign immigration (see for example Ramiro Guerra y Sanchez 1964 [1927], Julio Le Riverend 1963, 1967, and Zanetti and Garcia 1976). Exceptions include historian Juan Pérez de la Riva who authored the much-cited essay, "Cuba y la migración antillana, 1900-1931," which examines Haitians' reception and reputation in Cuba, life on the sugar plantations, demographics, and cultural practices (1979), and Rolando Alvarez Estevez' *Azúcar e inmigración 1900-1940* which, while an account of the sugar boom, also considers Haitian laborers' responses to exploitation (1988). Non-Cuban historians who have published articles about Haitian labor migration to Cuba include Robert Hornel (1976), Mats Lundahl (1982), Barry Carr (1998), and Aviva Chomsky (2000), and their work is cited at length in Chapter Two.

Art historian and performance scholar Judith Bettelheim, one of the few non-Cuban researchers to document *haitiano-cubano* performance groups during the 1980s and 1990s, discusses their growing presence in carnivals and festivals in eastern Cuba (1988, 2001). Also, three filmic documentaries of note explore Cuba's Haitian heritage: *Huellas* directed by Roberto Román González (1986), *Añoranza en Semana Santa* directed by David González López (2000), and *Añoranza* produced by Tunasvisión in Las Tunas, Cuba (2002).

In the recent decade, interest in projects focused on *haitiano-cubano* communities has resulted in the publication of historical, journalistic, and ethnographic explorations by María

Eugenia Espronceda Amor (2001), Raimundo Gomez Navia (2005), and Bernarda Sevillano Andrés (2007), as well as a number of university thesis projects and conference papers.<sup>29</sup> Dissertations and articles by non-Cuban historians Marc McLeod (2000, 2010) and Matthew Casey (2011, 2012), and ethnographers Yanique Hume (2011) and Emmanuel Pereira (2013) have expanded our knowledge of Cuba's Haitian diaspora.

However, there is still a grand lacuna in the study of Cuba's Haitian legacy. My dissertation aims to correct this omission of *haitiano-cubano* culture and history. This Introduction is followed by Chapter Two, "The Sociocultural History of Haitians in Cuba," which outlines the history of Haitian migrants to Cuba, starting in the early twentieth century and follows their experiences until mid-century. It includes the story of a particular family, the Milanés, who endured hardships in their new country but eventually thrived. Chapter Three, "Vodú Chic: Haitian Religion and the Folkloric Imaginary in Socialist Cuba," spans the time frame from the 1959 Cuban Revolution until today. It examines how *haitiano-cubanos* formed folkloric performance groups and collaborated with cultural institutions such as the Casa del Caribe. Chapter Four, "*Haitiano-Cubano* Voices," foregrounds the stories of three Cubans of Haitian descent who publicly claim and perform their Haitian heritage: a choir director, a Vodú priest, and a young man increasingly proud of his roots, and I analyze what *haitiano-cubano* identification means to these individuals in the twenty-first century. Two different kinds of Vodú ritual parties are described in Chapter Five, "The Ferocious and the Gracious" shedding light on *haitiano-cubanos* as the shapers and agents of their social relations with wider Cuban society.

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<sup>29</sup> See for example Vásquez Lemes (2007), Noris Frenel (2009), Duvergel Brooks (2009), Ronda Ynfantes (2009) and Cepero Recoder (2012).

## Conclusion

The presence and contributions of Haitian migrants and their descendants to the Cuban cultural mix and thus to Cuban national identity is far deeper and more profound than hitherto acknowledged. If scholars, and even lay readers, wish to understand Cuba as a whole—its cultural mix, its national identity—they must cast a wider net that includes and accounts for the eastern portion of the island, one that doesn't distort history by ignoring or misinterpreting the contributions of Cuba's substantial, and, until recently, much despised, Haitian-descended ethnic minority. My project looks at a community that was once considered Cuba's most isolated and inaccessible. I argue that today, *haitiano-cubanos* maintain their traditions, beliefs, and cultural identity as much because of their contact with state agencies, research institutions, tourism, and staged folkloric performance as despite these. The Haitian heritage community in Cuba, once considered outlandish and “other,” came to be inserted into the Cuban national imaginary through participation in the economy and imaginary of “folklore.”

Among the rewards yielded by examining eastern Cuba and its *haitiano-cubano* communities are a deeper understanding of how migrants and ethnic minorities participate in the construction of regional and national imaginaries. We also learn about how marginal groups can use performance, spiritual practices, and access to the public sphere to re-shape their reputation and status, asserting control over representations of their legacy.

## Chapter Two – The Sociocultural History of Haitians in Cuba

### One Family’s Story

In March of 2009, during one of many visits to Pablo Milanés Fuentes’ farm, high in the Sierra Maestra mountains in Santiago province in eastern Cuba, Pablo recounted for me the story of his father’s migration to Cuba, describing his father’s initial struggle and eventual success in new surroundings. Pablo is a respected priest of Vodú, the director of a folkloric dance troupe, and an iconic figure among people of Haitian descent in Cuba. His father, Arsernault Silnet (Milanés is the hispanicized version of Silnet), came to



Figure 6 – Pablo Milanés Fuentes – ©Viddal 2008

Santiago de Cuba in 1920 from Saint-Louis-du-Sud on Haiti’s southwestern coast. Pablo recounted, “My grandfather, Demosis Silnet, came first, then he brought his older brother and his oldest son, and later Arsenault, my father, a younger son. He came because people were saying that there was money to be made in Cuba, *muchos dólares*. They came and cut cane, picked coffee, every kind of work they could find. My father stayed in Cuba, along with Lucien, another brother. The others, in time, went back to Haiti.”<sup>30</sup> Arsenault Silnet rented land in a sharecropping arrangement and grew coffee on a farm called Las Caobas, where he met and married his wife, Pablo’s mother, a Cuban woman. He and

<sup>30</sup> Interview 14 March 2009, in Pilón del Cauto in Santiago province.

his wife eventually had a son, and were happy. But, relates Pablo, “Then came the law of deportation; they were sending the Haitians back to Haiti. My father picked up his suitcase and fled. He left my mother behind on the little farm, crying. There was nothing else to do. He ran deeper into the mountains. He hid, but later he came back. He was *muy guapo* (tough, gutsy) and he came back after deportations ended.”

Between coffee harvests, Pablo’s father would head down the mountain to the plains to cut cane. During sugar season, he came home only on the weekends, on foot, bringing whatever he could for the family to eat. Says Pablo, “He worked very hard. To buy the first farm, we went a year without entering a store. We ate beans that we grew ourselves, kept a pig. My father had one pair of shoes for important occasions, nothing more. He worked barefoot. Barefoot.”

Eventually, the family acquired herds of livestock, a team of mules, four farms, a little store, and a bar in Palma Soriano. Pablo describes his father as “a very hard worker, very respected here in Cuba.”

Pablo’s mother had three sisters. Another married a Haitian man as well and the third married a Jamaican. Only one married a Cuban. Arsenault Silnet taught his Cuban wife to cook Haitian foods, including “dumplin” (dumplings), “boullion” (soup) and sweets such as “tablet” (peanut brittle), and to speak and sing in Haitian Creole. Pablo remarked that his mother was still alive and would turn 99 at her next birthday. He asserted that he practiced Vodú “in the old style,” like his father and grandfather, and added, “my father was not a *santero*, [not an initiated priest], but he “served the spirits” (“li sevi lwa yo”). Arsenault Silnet “set a table” for the Vodú spirits on appropriate days and feted the Masá (the holy twins, spelled Marasa in current Haitian Creole orthography), the Sen Blan (the Rada, or “white” spirits), and Lesange (the “angels” or ancestors) with food, drink, and song. He was also an herbalist, “curing with leaves” and



preparing bottles filled with “many herbs and roots” (“anpil fèy, anpil racine”) preserved in rum. Pablo upholds this tradition today; preparing bottles of rum and herbs is important for healings and to salute the spirits. Arsenault Silnet died in 1993 at the age of 105. Pablo explains that his father was still strong while he slowly succumbed to a malignant prostate, and that “there was time for us to converse, we talked a lot. My father passed on his wisdom.”<sup>31</sup>



Figure 7 – Milanés family members preparing a “Manyé Mort,” a table decked with food and drink for the ancestors, featuring a photograph of deceased family patriarch Arsenault Silnet. Below the table is a “Manyé Masá,” or traditional small repast for the sacred trickster twins.

The story of Pablo’s father helps us delve deeper into the experiences of Haitian migrants to Cuba. Many did not accomplish what they hoped for. Failing to save enough money to return to Haiti to marry or purchase a farm, they remained impoverished outsiders in Cuba. Others, like Arsenault Silnet, were successful in their new home, becoming prosperous and respected members of local communities. As Arsenault Silnet’s legacy of multiple farms, businesses, and thriving descendants illustrates, the chronicle of Haitian migration to Cuba is not just a tale of dispossession and penury, but also includes stories of tenacity, empowerment, and achievement.

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<sup>31</sup> All quotes are from an interview on 14 March 2009, in Pilón del Cauto in Santiago province, with my translation from Spanish and Haitian Creole.

Furthermore, the Milanés family epitomizes an approach to migration that characterized many Haitian laborers, who arrived with or eventually sent for their brothers, cousins, sons, and nephews. Migration was not necessarily a solo undertaking, but instead could be a complex family strategy including coming and going between the islands (see also Casey 2012:100-106). The Haitians who stayed in Cuba often did so because they had formed relationships with Cuban women, started families, and acquired land, animals, and belongings. While Haitian laborers have generally been termed by historians and ethnographers to be the lowest group on the social ladder, paradoxically, the Cuban women who married Haitians are described as taking pride in speaking Creole and in preparing Haitian cuisine and using Haitian farming methods and herbal cures.

Transmitting praxis such as language, songs and music, foodways, or spiritual customs to the next generation is generally considered to be strongly influenced by the women in a family. But most of the *braceros* were men. Haitian women made up only a small percentage of migrants. Official statistics log the portion of women disembarking from Haiti at between two and twenty percent for most years, depending on the port of entry (Espronceda 2001:18). Most sources note the presence of many aging bachelors in Haitian communities (Guanche and Moreno 1988:9-10, Álvarez Estévez 1998:45, James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007, Sevillano 2007:53). But some of the *braceros* were successful enough to send for their wives from home, and Haitian women also arrived independently to work in the sugar refineries, as independent food vendors, or as prostitutes (Espronceda 2001:23-24). Haitian laborers also married Cuban women, and, interestingly, Haitian traditions were passed on to the next generation by these women, as they learned and adopted their husbands' customs. Often, their children chose to form relationships with others of Haitian descent. In almost all *haitiano-cubano* communities that I

visited, I was told stories of intermarriage, and of Cuban women learned Creole, and farming, cooking, and healing skills from their husbands. A key future project will be to collect and explore more of these stories in order to fill gaps in our understanding of the transmission of Haitian culture in Cuba.

While many Cubans looked down on Haitians, others valued their skills—toughness, hard work, herbal knowledge, language, spiritual devotion, and ability to create flavorsome dishes and scrumptious treats from simple ingredients—and formed alliances and marriages. Arsenault Silnet toiled but was eventually successful. He sets the tone for this chapter, which outlines not only the marginalization of Haitian laborers in Cuba, but also looks for their agency and their attempts to assert control over their lives.

In order to interpret Haitian laborers' struggles for social and economic empowerment in Cuba, this chapter examines salient aspects of both islands' history, including the economic, political, and social influences that produced this flow of migration. One of the issues we will consider is the formation of nationhood in both Haiti and Cuba. Each has a unique history of revolution. The fierce Cuban struggle for independence from Spain lasted much of the second half of the nineteenth century, but victory was anticlimactic. Sovereignty was curtailed because the United States stepped in to assert authority over the new republic's government, economy, and foreign relations. In the French colony of Saint Domingue, a prolonged and bloody slave insurrection toppled the world's most prosperous plantation society, founding the nation of Haiti in 1804. But the proud black republic's self-rule was curbed by periods of political instability and, a little over a century later, by a U.S. military occupation that lasted from 1915 to 1934. Each island has a history of U.S. intervention during the early twentieth century, the period that coincides with migration. Next, this chapter examines the characteristics of Haitian migrants to

Cuba, and their numbers. We will also investigate the era of forced repatriations during the 1930s, comparing the fates of Haitian and Jamaican guestworkers, and explore Haitians' experiences in Cuba. While Haitians were by and large poor and disenfranchised, they also intermingled with their host society in various ways. They married, formed families, and interacted with Cubans in areas such as performance and music, spiritual practice, and as healers and herbalists. Finally, we will look at Haitians in Cuba in the years immediately before and after the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

### Linked Islands

The islands of Cuba and Haiti have been connected by migration since the late eighteenth century. The conflict and carnage leading to the Haitian Revolution impelled a surge of the populace to leave the French colony, with many sailing for eastern Cuba. But the bulk of migrants arrived over a hundred years later, during the first half of the twentieth century, most to work in the sugar industry. Life in Cuba for many of these Haitian cane workers and their descendants was difficult. In the process of navigating exploitation and discrimination, Haitians, and later *haitiano-cubanos*, managed to command respect and to preserve portions of their cultural heritage. Their descendants have successfully parlayed religious ceremonies and dance and music traditions into cultural capital, much as their forebears made use of such things as agricultural skill, knowledge of medicinal plants, and opportunities inherent in migratory work to survive in their new home.

While the growth of Cuba's sugar industry has been detailed by both local and foreign scholars—including industrialization, technological advances, the organization of land and production, tariff and trade policies, the role of foreign capital, sovereignty and pseudo-coloniality—the aspirations and experiences of the laborers who fueled it have not (Casey 2012).

Aside from brief mentions in connection with newsworthy events such as strikes or in the context of formal organizations such as labor unions, there is a notable absence of scholarship on migrants' presence in Cuba, even though Haitian labor was a key ingredient in republican Cuba's economic expansion. In this chapter, I focus on the experiences of the agricultural laborers, or *braceros*, who came to cut sugar cane in the initial decades of the twentieth century when the industry was rapidly expanding in eastern Cuba. Why did they migrate? What were their lives like in Cuba? How did they work together with various sectors of the local populace? What conditions shaped their migration, social engagement, and treatment by other Cubans and why did many persist and settle in Cuba despite discrimination and poverty? Moreover, how were they able to maintain their values and traditions, including spiritual belief systems such as Vodú? Answers to these questions lie in both the events that lead to the waves of migration from Haiti to Cuba and the reception and experiences of the migrants once there, so we begin by looking at Cuba's history as a colony that became a nation, where conceptions of race, nationhood, and citizenship were formed over a period of centuries.

#### From Colony to Republic: Nation Formation in Cuba

Cuba was a Spanish colony for almost four hundred years. Christopher Columbus laid claim to the island after landing on its eastern shores in 1492 and conquistador Diego Velázquez colonized the territory, bringing settlers and founding towns including Santiago and Havana in the early 1500s. When precious metals were discovered in the continental Americas, the Spanish crown focused on developing its colonies there, particularly the viceroyalties that are today Mexico and Peru. During the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, Cuba was a colonial backwater, populated largely by cattlemen, farmers, and tobacco growers, and it had a relatively

small slave population. But when a slave uprising toppled France's most prosperous sugar colony, neighboring Saint-Domingue, making the independent country of Haiti in 1804, an opportunity arose for Cuba, where colonists began to concentrate on large-scale sugar production using slaves. Between 15,000 and 30,000 immigrants, white planters who self-identified as French, some bringing their most valuable black household slaves, and also free people of color, arrived in Cuba during the revolutionary period in Saint-Domingue. Some moved on to New Orleans, but many stayed, and a new elite of wealthy slave-holding plantation owners grew among the French arrivals and the Cuban-born whites (Yacou 1993, Orozco Melgar 2002, Cruz Rios 2006, Álvarez Estévez and Guzmán Pascual 2008). The island, taking over the role once occupied by Saint-Domingue, became the Caribbean's new sugar giant, with Cuba becoming the largest producer in the world by the mid-nineteenth century (Thomas 1998:61).

While insurrections gave rise to national independence in most of Spain's mainland colonies in the Americas during in the early nineteenth century, Cuba was known by the epithet "Spain's faithful isle" because it remained a loyal dependency until decades later (Thomas 1998, Pérez 1988, Ferrer 1999). Ferrer explains, "The story of Cuba's deviance from the Latin American norm is, by now, a familiar one: in the face of potential social revolution, creole (Cuban-born) elites opted to maintain the colonial bond with Spain. With that bond, they preserved as well a prosperous and expanding sugar industry built on the labor of enslaved Africans" (1999:1-2). Even as the Cuban plantocracy enjoyed the fruits of following in Saint-Domingue's footsteps, it assuredly wanted to avoid becoming "another Haiti" when it came to a potential revolution. Shortly after the revolution, stereotypes of Haitians as primitive, savage, and prone to rebellion made their way through nearby colonies, where slaveholders and government officials cast the overthrow as a race war against white colonists, and these were so

thoroughly disseminated that they persisted long after slavery had ended (Ferrer 1999:2, Casey 2012:16) and well into the twentieth century (McLeod 1998:602, de la Fuente 2000:54).

Although they offset some of the fear of rebellion with the security of Spanish imperial forces, colonists became increasingly frustrated with the protectionist and isolationist strategies of the Spanish crown and began to agitate for increased local control over tariff policies and more open trade. Formerly devoted “colonists” began to think of themselves as “Cubans.” As the second half the the nineteenth century wore on, a groundswell for self-determination grew. At issue was the islanders’ desire for representative government and control over commercial, economic, and political policies. When Spain refused to budge on reforms, nationalist drives intensified in “Spain’s faithful isle,” resulting in a series of uprisings: the Ten Years War (1868-1878) the Guerra Chiquita or Little War (1879-1880) and the final War of Independence (1895-1898).

Many historians (including Guerra y Sánchez 1964, James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007, Helg 1995, Pérez 1995, Ferrer 1999) agree that Cuba began to see its own national culture emerge during the Ten Years War, where different sectors of Cuban society came into contact in new ways, uniting against Spain across class and color lines. Some landowners freed their slaves to fight, offering emancipation in exchange for military service.<sup>32</sup> In eastern Cuba, at least 60 percent of the troops were men of color, and moreover, notes Ferrer, “all three rebellions were waged by an Army unique in the history of the Atlantic world—the liberation Army, a multiracial fighting force that was integrated at all ranks” (Ferrer 1999:3). A few former slaves, such as the mulatto general Antonio Maceo, became lauded military commanders. As Cubans of

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<sup>32</sup> Emancipation in Cuba was a gradual process, and slavery coincided with other forms of bondage such as indentured servitude. Slaves engaged in various strategies to achieve freedom, including joining the insurgency in exchange for liberty, self-purchase, and legal suits. The Moret or “free womb” law liberated elders and children born to slaves in 1880, and an apprenticeship or *patronato* program created stages towards freedom, culminating in full emancipation in 1886 (Scott 2000).

different classes and colors fought together in the wars of independence, a new vision of a racially integrated, free Cuba emerged (Helg 1995, Ferrer 1999). José Martí, an exiled writer, intellectual, abolitionist, and patriot, is known as the “apostle” of the last uprising. He envisioned an independent Cuba that offered a raceless equality for all Cubans, proclaiming that “Insistir en las divisiones de raza...es dificultar la ventura pública, y la individual ... Cubano es más que blanco, más que mulato, más que negro” (Insisting on racial divisions ... hinders individual and public well-being ... Cuban is more than white, more than mulatto, more than black) and wrote about the role of universal suffrage, land reform, education, and free speech in the creation of modern Latin American democracies (in Ripoli 1995:52). Historian Aline Helg describes the new patriotism and pride former slaves and their descendants felt towards the project of independence from Spain and proposes that “Afro Cubans’ self-perception as members of the raza de color evolved, overall, with their fundamental role in the anti-colonial wars...they ceased to see themselves only as victims and began to think of themselves as heroes...they gained a new race pride, associated with courage and determination. They were simultaneously black and Cuban” (1995:14).

There was a powerful vision of a new transracial society brewing during Cuba’s struggle for independence, but profound fault lines riddled the new nation, caught between the rhetoric about a free brotherhood and the old hierarchies, prejudices, and fears, including the desire to impress other nations as “civilized.” Ferrer notes that light-skinned black officers in the victorious insurgent army such as Antonio Maceo and Flor Crombet were portrayed in the press as “educated, articulate and dedicated,” and, in the case of Crombet, a descendant of mulatto plantation-owning *francés* refugees from Saint-Domingue, praised for “his elegance, his knowledge of French and English, and his familiarity with European history and politics,” while



by contrast dark-skinned officers such as Guillermo Moncada and Quintín Banderas were publicly characterized as poor, uneducated, and savage, traveling with barefoot troops who had “rings in their noses” and female lovers in tow (1998:676-677). Ferrer explains, “Black leaders were acceptable—indeed desirable—but they had to be black leaders of a particular kind. If race was no longer a rigid standard for inclusion—culture, performance, and civility now appeared to be quite critical” (1998:677).

What would be the boundaries of racial inclusion and the makeup of political leadership in the new republic? Despite the discourse and spirit of the revolution, people of African descent were not allowed equal opportunities, and, as Pérez articulates, “the contradictions of colonial society remained unresolved” (1986:57). Aviva Chomsky explains: “The very process of independence, emancipation, and nation-building had transformed Cuban blacks so that they became, instead of Cuban blacks, black Cubans. “Race” became a cultural and historical attribute rather than a biological one, and a virulent racism against blacks could thus coexist with an ideology of racial inclusiveness. (2000:435-436). Chomsky contends that white elites and political leadership in Cuba subscribed to a “vision of race and nation in which nationality transcended race, and blackness could be stigmatized at the same time that Cuban blacks were repeatedly told that since they were Cuban, they were *not really black*” (2000:446 italics in original). Participation in the fight for independence that created the nation made blacks, in the eyes of many whites, Cuban citizens, as long as they remained grateful for inclusion and attempted to conform to cultural and social stereotypes of European-ness (Chomsky 2000).

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Cuba’s devastated post-independence-war landscape and infrastructure and its lack of financial resources combined with the new dominance of the United States to encourage Haitian immigration to Cuba when demand for

Cuban sugar surged. Because of racism and the tradition of anti-Haitian feeling, however, the experience of black laborers in general and Haitians in particular in Cuba was marked by discrimination, enforced dependence, and even brutality. The Antillean *braceros* who arrived during the first few decades of the republic were not pulled into this idealistic, if flawed, new Cuban nation; they remained foreign, isolated, “other” (James 1996 [2007:111]). Chomsky argues, “If Cuban blacks were—at least potentially—citizens, non-Cuban blacks epitomized all that was threatening about blackness” (2000:433). Foreign blacks, and particularly Haitians, were feared for their presumed propensity to incite racial discord, their culturally “African” habits, and their lack of patriotic loyalty to the Cuban nation and therefore, by default, to their co-nationals, Cuban whites.

#### The Postcolonial Cuban Republic: U.S. Intervention, Sugar Economics, Labor and Race

Meanwhile, as the frontier in the American West had been disappearing during the latter nineteenth century, United States financiers began to look for new markets and investment opportunities in the Caribbean and Latin America. Located not far off the coast of Florida, Cuba appealed, and the United States expanded trade and investment with the island. The United States also was eager to show it had recovered from the devastating Civil War of the 1860s and could emerge as a new political power on the world stage. Newspaper magnates such as Hearst and Pulitzer stirred nationalist sentiments while reporting on Spanish atrocities in Cuba and stressed the danger to U.S. citizens and investments there (Campbell 2001). President McKinley sent a naval ship, the USS *Maine*, to Havana harbor to stand ready to assist any U.S. citizens imperiled by the conflict in Cuba. When the *Maine* blew up under mysterious circumstances, McKinley entered the United States in the Cuban War for Independence in February of 1898,

ostensibly to protect American citizens and property on the island (Pérez 1985:176-183, McGillivray 2009:67).

The war ended with Cuba's liberation from Spain in August of 1898, but the new country was independent in name only. Pérez notes that the "victors had little to show for their hard won triumph ... Cubans achieved self-government without self-determination and independence without sovereignty" (1986:56-57). Cuba had won its liberty with the last-minute intervention of U.S. troops, including Teddy Roosevelt and his "Rough Riders" in the battle of San Juan Hill outside Santiago. While the intervention of the United States accelerated Spain's defeat, it curbed Cuba's triumph. Although no longer a Spanish colony, the island entered a new semi-colonial affiliation with the United States, which installed a military government and created legislation effectively making Cuba a U.S. dependency. The McKinley administration compelled Cuba to sign the Platt Amendment, allowing for U.S. intervention and control and a military base in the bay of Guantánamo in eastern Cuba in exchange for recognition and badly needed aid and investment. Roosevelt, who succeeded McKinley, gave Cuba formal independence in 1902, but reserved the right to manage Cuba's economy and foreign policy. Decades of war for autonomy from Spain ended with Cuba in a relationship of deference to the United States and with curtailed sovereignty. Investors from the United States had the capital to purchase land, rebuild an infrastructure destroyed by decades of war, and reconstruct a profitable sugar industry, but they wanted some measure of local control in order to do so.

In 1902, the new Cuban republic was struggling. Veterans of the wars of independence, particularly black veterans, roamed the island in search of work, impoverished and discontented (Pérez 1995). Historian Louis Pérez Jr. testifies that "Uncompensated and unthanked veterans became the final casualties of the war for independence" (Pérez 1986:86). Nationalist fighters

had burned Spanish-owned sugar fields and mills and laid waste to much of the countryside in a war of attrition. Pérez relates that of the 1,100 sugar mills in operation in Cuba before the last War of Independence, only 207 still existed afterward, and that over a hundred thousand tobacco and coffee plantations, cattle ranches, and subsistence farms were abandoned (1985:193). In September 1899, General Fitzhugh Lee reported to Governor Brooke, the head of the U.S. occupation: “Business of all sorts is suspended. Agricultural operations have ceased; large sugar estates with their enormous and expensive machinery are destroyed; houses burned; stock driven off for consumption by the Spanish troops or killed” (in Pérez 1999:101). Lundahl explains that during the fight for independence, at least two hundred thousand people had perished from disease and starvation associated with the devastation of the countryside and brutal Spanish policies, particularly in eastern Cuba; Helg puts the number even higher, at three hundred thousand.<sup>33</sup> Pérez describes an eerie postwar “wasteland” of abandoned villages and farms where “stillness had settled over vast expanses of Cuban countryside” (1999:100). Much of the rural population had been forced into concentration camps, losing their homes, livestock, and tools, or had fled to the cities looking for security. There was little credit available from banks for plantation owners to rebuild ruined sugar factories or for farmers to mend their granges, and there was no help for individual peasant farmers to re-initiate production. After the war and before the nation could recover, a wave of outside, mostly U.S., investment ensured most small subsistence farmers would become agricultural or industrial workers (Pérez 1995, 1999).

With little financing or capital available to Cuban businesses, foreign individuals and investment groups swooped across the island, buying up land in tremendous quantities, especially in the east, where it was cheapest because this was the most devastated area and

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<sup>33</sup> The Spanish had sent General Weyler, known as “the butcher,” to Cuba 1895 to subdue the nationalists. His solution was to herd large segments of rural populations into concentration camps, where countless died from insufficient nutrition and the spread of communicable diseases.

owners of destroyed mills were ready to sell. Destitute smallholders had already packed up for the cities in search of work and day labor. Cuban farmers, without any means to repair and reinvest in their granges, sold their lands to foreign investors. In 1901, United Fruit was able to purchase 200,000 acres of land in Oriente at only \$2 per acre (Hornel 1976). By 1905, only 25 percent of land in Cuba was still owned by Cubans (Pérez 1995:197). Most of the rest now belonged to U.S. corporations and speculators, particularly in eastern Cuba. The great virgin forests of Oriente were felled for giant mechanized sugar plantations (Hornel 1976:233, Lundahl 1982:24). With capital now available to construct rail lines for transporting cane, formerly remote and inaccessible locations became profitable for cultivation. Expanding Cuba's sugar industry became a top priority for investors, who now controlled nearly every sector of agriculture and its associated processing, and this required intensive, inexpensive manual labor. Meeting the needs for such labor, however, ran afoul of new government regulations.

The republican government pursued a plan of “blanqueamiento” or “whitening” by encouraging migration from Spain and other parts of Europe to counter the perceived threat of a large black population and demographically to offset the descendants of African slaves (Chomsky 2000:422-427, de la Fuente 2001:45-53). These Cuban immigration policies attracted nearly 900,000 Spaniards to Cuba between 1900 and 1929 (McLeod 1998:600). However, explains McLeod, insufficient numbers of these new immigrants went to labor in the cane fields, and sugar companies “thus turned to Afro-Caribbean immigrants as a source of plantation labor, convincing Cuban government officials that the economic ‘necessity’ of cheap labor outweighed the supposed evils of black immigration” (1998:599). McLeod continues, noting that fear of “Haitian witchcraft and proclivity for revolt, of Antillean criminality, disease, and immorality in general remained strong in the minds of native Cubans and Spanish immigrants, even as sugar

company managers prevailed upon Cuban officials to permit the immigration of Afro-Caribbean laborers into Cuba after 1912” (1998:602). As de la Fuente posits in *A Nation For All*, “Thus two alternative migration policies quickly emerged as possibilities. Bearing the black ‘danger’ in mind, the given state openly favored a ‘colonization’ solution that advocated the immigration of stable European families, which would ‘improve’—that is, whiten—the composition of the native population. The sugar companies, in turn favored the migration of seasonal workers and saw in the West Indies a great source of cheap labor” (2001:101).

Two new laws were passed, in 1902 and 1906 respectively, both modeled on legislation in the U.S. which regulated and restricted contract labor in an effort to curb the entrance of black Caribbeans, particularly Haitians and Jamaicans. Casey notes that while the ban was described in terms of curbing contract laborers, racial fears and the influence of scientific racism actually underpinned the regulations. “Journalists and political officials voiced their fears that ... Haitians and other [Antillean] immigrants ... would put an end to white Cubans’ numerical majority. They also complained that these immigrants carried diseases, could potentially cause a race war between blacks and whites, and had primitive habits that would cause the Cuban nation to regress” (2012:57). Although European immigrants, particularly Spaniards, referred to as *peninsulares* in Cuba, came to the island by the hundreds of thousands, they did not add substantially to a potential workforce for plantation labor. Instead, many become small farmers or entered commerce or services (James, Millet, and Alarcón: 2007:36). Spanish migrants tended to prefer the cities, especially Havana, leaving the need for rural manual labor unfilled (Lundahl 1982). In the end, notes de la Fuente, the economic argument predominated, and the Cuban government “sacrificed whitening to sugar production” (2001:102).

As World War I interrupted sugar production in Europe, destroying sugar beet fields in France, Belgium, and Germany, Cuban sugar became more and more profitable. Called the “dance of the millions,” Cuba’s tenfold increase in sugar production, which took place between 1898 and 1917, meant that enormous profits were realized for financiers and investors. Making this happen required increasing numbers of available workers to cut and process the sugar cane, so the new mechanized mills could grind all night (Casey 2012:52). Chomsky observes, “if in the colonial period it was the Spanish-dominated sugar industry that encouraged the widespread importation of African slave labor, in the neocolonial period it was the newly mechanized, U.S.-dominated sugar industry that fostered a new influx of black immigrant workers” (2000:420).

While historians of the period focused on the depopulation of the countryside as the force behind the need for the importation of labor, contemporary Cuban historian José Cernicharo argues that the quantity of unemployed workers in Cuba after the war of independence could have met the demand. It was the pursuit of profit that motivated foreign investors to seek out other, cheaper labor. Indeed, some historians contend that the arrival of the *braceros* depressed wages for Cubans, while others argue that cutting sugar cane was not a job Cubans or other immigrants, such as the Spanish, wanted to do (Cernicharo 1994). Despite the immigration regulations and opposition from various sectors of Cuban society, sugar companies began to develop strategies to obtain inexpensive labor and, headed by the United Fruit Company, the sugar industry pressured the Cuban government to create a legal way to bring in Antillean workers (Thomas 1998, Cernicharo 1994).

In addition to the desire for labor to be cheap, foreign investors wanted a less revolutionary—or equality-minded—workforce. Black Cubans, many of whom had sacrificed much to form the new republic, were facing disillusionment. While the independence movement

had used rhetorics of a national identity that would transcend racial difference and offer citizenship to all, post-independence reality did not live up to these ideals for most Cubans of color. Ferrer argues that the struggle for independence was partly fired by the idea of a nation “imagined to include people (men) of all colors (transformed into raceless Cubans)” (1998:665), but that after the war, dialogues shifted to a focus on the new nation’s worth in the international forum as demonstrated by its citizens’ “decorum, civility, and refinement,” a discourse founded on certain notions of race, gender, and class (1998:683). Ideas about race were complex, with cultured Cuban people of color accepted in a way that the poor and uneducated were not. Helg contends that the hand-picked regime supported by the U.S. occupying forces, made up not of independence activists but rather the most conservative elements of the Cuban pre-war elite, barred Afro-Cubans from realizing their post-independence expectations. Instead black Cubans “found themselves marginalized in the private and public employment sectors by discrimination and Spanish immigration. In order to justify the status quo, the Cuban white elite resorted to the myth of keeping racial equality but simultaneously continued to portray Afro-Cubans as inferior and uncivilized” (1995:116).

In the years following the war, former liberation fighters rallied for their rights with strikes and insurrections. Pérez explains “Repeatedly, Cubans of color protested their shabby treatment, and especially their continued exclusion from government position in public office ... many Afro Cubans abandoned hope of obtaining redress within existing political structures and began to organize ... outside the established party system” (1995:221). By 1908, a group of Afro-Cubans, most of them veterans, most of those from the officer corp, and nearly all of them former slaves, had had enough of yearning for a better life. They formed the Partido Independiente de Color, which led a revolt in Oriente in 1912. With U.S. Marines on standby to



assist, the Cuban puppet administration responded aggressively. The PIC's series of armed protests was brutally repressed. Thousands of black civilians were killed by the Cuban military's new technology: machine guns. Throughout the summer of 1912, the army shot not only armed demonstrators but also individuals or groups they merely supposed to be threatening (Scott 1985, Helg 1995).

The United Fruit Company, with extensive holdings in eastern Cuba, needed a more servile workforce to toil on its growing plantations. According to Thomas, "In late 1912, after the Negro revolt, the United Fruit Company asked if they could bring 1,400 Haitians to work on their plantations in Oriente... In succeeding years, a torrent came for harvest" (1998:524). Sugar companies successfully defeated popular opinion and sectors of the government, and the prohibition on contract labor from the Caribbean was overturned just before the 1913 sugar harvest season.<sup>34</sup>

Between 1902 and 1919, more than 1,400 sugar-processing plants were completed. Some were gigantic, like El Morón and El Stewart in Camagüey, and El Delicias and El Manatí in Santiago. Estimates vary widely, but generally fall between 180,000 and 642,000 Haitian immigrants entering Cuba during the first three decades of the twentieth century, nearly all of them to work in the booming sugar industry. Railroads were built to transport cane. Whole sugar towns were born, where employees lived in company-owned housing and shopped at a company-owned depot. Many of the new sugar complexes began to resemble mining or oil towns (Hornel 1976). During the harvest season, or *zafra*, when work was plentiful, recruits spent their wages

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<sup>34</sup> Casey notes that while pressure from sugar companies and foreign capital pushed the legalization of contract labor, local actors also shaped the content and implementation of migration policy. Agricultural workers, traders, and other agents had long traveled to Cuba, both during the colonial period in the nineteenth century and during the first decade of the republic (1902-1912) despite legal prohibitions. Haitian consuls and local Cuban authorities along the coastlines had a level of control over travel and migration and labor that influenced or countermanded official policies in varied ways.

on food, shoes, new outfits, gambling, and recreation (Casey 2012:146-157). Many did not find a means to invest their earnings, but subsisted in cycles of boom and bust. During the dead season between harvests, the *tiempo muerto*, hunger and debt beset most laborers. Historian Hornel explains, “What only a decade or two before had been a society of largely self-sufficient small farmers, was transformed into one of highly dependent farm laborers working for predominantly foreign corporations, eating foreign-produced foods, often living in company towns, and buying from company stores” (1976:235).

This brief overview of Cuba’s history from colony through the early days of the republic is the foundation from which I will examine the wave of migration from Haiti and the lives of Haitians and their children in Cuba. As the second-largest (after the Spanish) immigrant group in twentieth century Cuba, Haitians with their labor supplied a key ingredient in the fledgling nation’s economic expansion via sugar. Yet little is known directly about their lives, motivations, and experiences. What is clear is that they came during a time of racism and difficulty for people of color in Cuba, the majority of them shortly after the suppressed 1912 uprising. Being from Haiti, which since 1791 had been stigmatized as unstable and primitive, increased the challenge of prospering in Cuba. Once Haitians arrived, though often misled by recruiters and with conditions in company towns that put them in debt, many stayed and made their way in Cuban society.

Although Haitians faced discrimination, racially-motivated state policies, and vilification by the Cuban press, they were nevertheless actively engaged with people of other nationalities both during their workdays and leisure time, in economic, social, and religious spheres. They were not helpless, as the vignette of Pablo Milanés’ father illustrates, and, as we shall see below,

they employed many strategies of empowerment, protection, and incorporation into Cuba. First, though, I will outline the migration itself.

Meanwhile in Haiti...

Once Cuban sugar production began to depend on labor from across the Windward Passage, the United States became more involved in Haiti, responding to a period of internal political turmoil in 1915 by invading, ostensibly to promote peace in the region, but actually to protect U.S. investments and business interests. The United States Marines occupied Haiti for nearly two decades, until 1934, carrying out policies that caused trauma and displacement for the peasant population. The heaviest migration from Haiti to Cuba coincides with the U.S. military occupation.

Casey proposes that while scholars have speculated about the causes of Haitian migration to Cuba and the political events that influenced the process, few in-depth historical studies have focused on migrant-sending areas or the ways that rural Haitians in varied places experienced the U.S. military occupation. He further notes that what migrants who returned to Haiti did after their homecoming also is understudied. In fact, posits Casey, the period between end of the Haitian Revolution in 1804 and the Occupation, effectively the entire nineteenth century, is understudied, and both academic and popular perceptions of Haiti during this time are that it was “poor and isolated” (2012:40).

Certainly, various factors influenced the decision to seek work in Cuba. Some factors included upheavals caused by the U.S. occupation, such as forced labor, land appropriation, and the racism and violence of the U.S. personnel. Other factors were increased pressure on land because of deforestation and an expanding population.

When U.S. Marines landed at Port-au-Prince in July of 1915, deforestation in rural Haiti already was underway. France had forced the young nation to agree to pay an “independence debt” of 150 million francs in 1825, and within a few decades, when punishing tax levels had failed to raise sufficient money, in addition to loans from European nations, the cash-strapped country began to rely on lumber from vast tracts of virgin forest as payment. With the U.S. occupation came a forced change in law, allowing foreigners to own land. U.S. interests began to expropriate, purchase, and clear land for large scale fruit, rubber, and sugar production, resulting in more deforestation, as well as the displacement of subsistence farmers (Richman 2008, Ramsey 2011: see chapter 3). Although historians debate whether enough peasants were displaced by expropriation to contribute significantly to the size of migration to Cuba (Casey 2012:80), the legacy of heavy taxes, expropriation, and the environmental effects of deforestation was devastating poverty.

The violence and racism of the U.S. occupation is well documented. In 1920 African American writer, educator, and diplomat James Weldon Johnson traveled to Haiti to observe the situation, which he characterized as “the hunting of ragged Haitians in the hills with machine guns.” In the second of four essays he published in *The Nation* in the late summer of 1920, Johnson describes what amounted to the kidnapping of men to work, far from home, on roads being built by the Occupation for months at a time, assassination, destruction of property, torture, murder, and rape. He also documents what he considers to be the birth of racism there:

Perhaps the most serious aspect of American brutality in Haiti is not to be found in individual cases of cruelty, numerous and inexcusable though they are, but rather in the American attitude, well illustrated by the diagnosis of an American officer discussing the situation and its difficulty: ‘The trouble with this whole business is that some of these people with a little money and education think they are as good as we are,’ and this is the keynote of the attitude of every American to every Haitian. Americans have carried American hatred to Haiti. (4 September 1920:267)

As terrible as the Occupation may have been for many Haitians, Casey notes that labor migration to Cuba was initially strongest from the coastal areas of southern Haiti, from which most of the first laborers came informally in small ships. The south was not the locale of the peasant rebellions or areas where the U.S. occupation appropriated land. The southern coastal towns and provinces had bad roads but easy maritime access to Cuba via boat. Casey explains, “For Haitians in the rural and coastal areas of Haiti’s Southern peninsula, maritime travel to Cuba was as much or more within the realm of the possible than a journey only a few miles inland” (2012:99).<sup>35</sup> When the migratory movement to Cuba eventually spread geographically to Haiti’s Northern peninsula, it became a state-regulated system of contract labor under the jurisdiction of the states of Haiti and Cuba. Grassroots networks of ships plying the waters were replaced by sugar companies’ paid recruiters.

In addition to the lure of recruiters, more positive reasons to migrate included higher wages on Cuban plantations. Haitian state policies encouraged movement to Cuba, and Casey believes that seasonal migrant work by one or more family members could be part of a diverse strategy for economic stability within extended families. Haitian elites believed that peasants would become more civilized after living in Cuba, learning there about basic hygiene, town life, regimented “modern” work values rather than African countryside subsistence farming values, and the use of tools beyond a machete. Casey quotes a Haitian consul in Cuba who declares, “Our country dwellers, barefoot from their birth, illiterate, accustomed to sleeping on the ground, eating on the ground or squatting, upon arriving in Cuba are continually shod, they sleep at least

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<sup>35</sup> Archaeologist Jorge Ulloa reveals that, in fact, the connection between the coastal regions of eastern Cuba and western Haiti goes back centuries. Ceramic artifacts found in coastal regions of eastern Cuba are more similar to artifacts found across the Windward Passage in Haiti than relics found on the opposite end of either island. Indigenous people on both islands found it easier to cross the ocean separating them than make land journeys across mountainous terrain (in Otaño 2008:13-14).

in a hammock, eat at a table, and learn, if not to read, at least to sign their names, often in Spanish, and they go to the theatre” (2012:234).

Although historical studies are slim, literature and newspaper essays of the period describe the *viejos* who came home from Cuba with newfangled status symbols like sunglasses and fancy shoes and a smattering of Spanish phrases. These *viejos* are characterized as not desiring to work rurally with their hands (Casey 2012:266-307).

### Estimating Numbers of Migrants

Before examining numbers of migrants during the largest wave of migration, it is useful to note that before guestworker migration was permitted in 1913, migration from Haiti to Cuba nevertheless occurred. Not only was it farther from the seat of Spanish colonial power after the capital moved from Santiago to Havana in 1589, but eastern Cuba had long had connections with other islands, and clandestine trading flourished, making for a well-established connection with the nearby coast of Haiti. As a thirteen-year slave rebellion culminated in the Haitian Revolution, waves of refugees, including planters and their domestic slaves and free people of color, had left for new shores, many arriving in eastern Cuba. Interchange did not stop completely after 1804, but continued during the nineteenth century and through the first decade of the Cuban republic (Casey 2012:34-72, Cruz Rios 2006). Before migration was legalized in 1913, there were exchanges of goods and movement of traders, sailors, and laborers in search of work. Up through the first decade of the twentieth century, borders were more permeable, less controlled. Entries from Haiti were not even recorded until 1902. Later, immigration controls were more advanced and stricter (Casey 2012:60,124).

Historians and ethnographers (including Pérez de la Riva, Lundahl, Alvarez Estévez, Carr, and McLeod) have proposed different counts of Haitian immigrants to Cuba during the

cane-worker boom between 1913 and 1931, with figures ranging from fewer than 200,000 to more than 600,000, depending on sources and methods utilized.<sup>36</sup> Labor recruiters paid bribes to circumvent quotas, so real numbers were much higher than official statistics kept by consulates and port authorities.<sup>37</sup> Some scholars estimate that illegal migration was as high as a third or half of the legal (Lundhal 1982). Casey explains that between 1913, when Antillean migrant workers were first permitted to enter the country to assist in the sugar harvest, and 1931, the last year of legal recruitment, “Cuban statistics recorded the arrival of 189,020 seasonal Haitian migrants in eastern Cuba. The actual number is much higher, as Haitians made the trip clandestinely before 1913, throughout the heyday of the movement, and even as late as the 1940s” (2012:2). Also difficult to calculate is how many cane cutters and coffee pickers returned to Haiti versus the number who settled in Cuba permanently. The Casa del Caribe research team that produced the monograph *el Vodú en Cuba* used algorithms based on the labor force necessary for harvest to arrive at a number of half a million Haitians. They write, “Not all of them settled in Cuba, probably no more than 250,000 stayed” (James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007).

### Demographic Features of Haitian Migrants in Cuba

Haitian migrants in Cuba were concentrated in rural areas, and they needed varied strategies to survive the *tiempo muerto* or “dead season” between sugar harvests. Particularly after sugar prices declined from their all-time high (after World War I), once finished with the harvesting and processing of sugar cane between January and April, most Haitians picked coffee from August to December. Besides moving between cane and coffee, they kept livestock such as

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<sup>36</sup> Estimates for other Antillean workers, such as Jamaicans and Barbadians, range from 75,000 to 130,000. See James, Millet, and Alarcón (1998) and Pérez de la Riva (1979).

<sup>37</sup> Lundahl notes, “Graft and trickery in the issues of visas and passports were common enough,” and emigration taxes levied on the workers constituted an important source of revenue for the Haitian government (1982:29).

chickens, goats, or pigs, and grew food for personal consumption, and Haitian women were famous for the preparation of sweets made from peanuts or coconuts and baked goods or snacks (Guanche and Moreno 1988, Espronceda 2001, Sevillano 2007).<sup>38</sup>

However, the migrants were disproportionately male. According to Cuban demographer María Eugenia Espronceda, statistics from Guantánamo province between 1913 to 1926 show that women comprised between 2.6% and 22.5% of migrants, with more women arriving during the later years of the migration (2001:18). Single men predominated, although many sent for brothers, cousins, or nephews, illustrating that working in Cuba was an economic strategy employed by Haitian families (Espronceda 2001:24, Sevillano 2007, Casey 2012:27). Although prostitution was a common feature in sugar boom towns, many Haitian men eventually formed long term unions with Cuban women. Often, the descendants of these relationships married others of partial Haitian heritage, called “pichones” in local Cuban slang.<sup>39</sup>

Many Haitians’ labor abilities were reduced to the agricultural sector or petty commerce due to illiteracy. Based on data gathered by Cuban immigration officials at ports of entry, Pérez de la Riva estimates that over 84% of Haitians who entered Cuba between 1912 and 1929 were illiterate, while only about 12% of the laborers who spoke English (i.e. Jamaicans, Barbadians) could not read and write (1979:27).<sup>40</sup> When Haitians formed families and had children, they tended not to send those children to Cuban schools, but instead hired a literate Haitian as tutor to give their children evening classes in French (Guanche and Moreno 1998, Espronceda 2001).

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<sup>38</sup> They still are. When I attended the first annual “Encuentro Bwa Kayiman” Haitian heritage festival in the town of San Germán in Holguín province, a demonstration of *haitiano-cubano* culinary skills was featured. Members of the community proudly displayed samples of “bonbons” such as *tablét* (peanut brittle) and *pé patat* (sweetened potato bread) to enthusiastic festival goers in the town plaza.

<sup>39</sup> While it can be used to describe Cubans of any heritage, *pichón*, which means chick or baby bird in Spanish, most often refers to Cubans of Haitian or Jamaican descent. Although it is common to hear the term in casual conversation in *haitiano-cubano* communities, many consider it disparaging or offensive.

<sup>40</sup> For comparison, Pérez de la Riva notes that 20% of immigrants from Spain during the time period were illiterate.



## The 1930s – Era of Repatriations

The conclusion of World War I and the resumption of sugar beet farming in Europe brought the “dance of the millions” sugar boom to an end in Cuba, and the economy began to pull in (Hornel 1976:238). In 1926, the government passed the Verjeda Act, attempting to increase sugar prices by cutting production, which increased unemployment (Pérez 1995:251). The period of the sugarcane harvest was reduced, and many sugar processing plants closed. Haitian migrants continued to arrive, however, even though jobs were disappearing. During the *tiempo muerto* when there was no employment at the sugar *centrales*, coffee began to make a comeback, as jobless agricultural laborers, particularly Haitians who had experience growing it back home, found it did well in hilly or mountainous areas unfit for sugar and required only modest investment (Hornel 1976, Casey 2012). But when the world financial crisis hit Cuba in 1929, unemployment grew again, and the “Great Depression came early to Cuba” (Hornel 1976:238).

As commodity prices fell during the depression of the 1930s, laws favoring native workers were enacted in Cuba, and forced repatriations sent thousands of Haitians back to Haiti. When depressed sugar prices and a concomitant economic stagnation paired with xenophobia and a growing nationalism (Casey 2012:2), Cuba closed its borders to Caribbean laborers in 1931 and began a program of deportation. An October 1933 decree allowed for forced repatriation of all foreign workers without jobs or proven financial resources. (McLeod 2000). In November, the Nationalization of Labor Decree, also known as the 50% Law (“Ley del 50%”), required, with some exceptions, that a minimum of half the workforce of any agricultural, commercial, or industrial business be Cuban and that at least half the payroll go to Cubans.

Another law in December established that those “illegally residing” in the country would be subjected to forced repatriation. During the decade of the 1930s more than 38,000 Haitians were forcibly repatriated (McLeod 1998, 2000).

During the epoch of repatriation, some Haitians had been in Cuba for more than two decades. Working hard, some had become landowners, others renters or leasers of land. James notes that in oral histories of this period, we begin to see Haitian who are *colonos* (tenant farmers) and *aparceros* (sharecroppers). They have settled and are no longer only temporary harvesters or migrant workers. Despite legal specifications regarding who was or was not to be deported, the process of repatriation was messy and indiscriminate. Members of the Rural Guard (“Guardia Rural”) were motivated to pursue the repatriation of Haitians because they were able to confiscate Haitian property as they went. They got the stored corn, the stored root vegetables, the pigs, the houses and furniture, the tiny savings of the Haitians. Haitians, whether fleeing to the mountains or repatriated, were forced to sell their belongings quickly and for little money (James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007). Historian Barry Carr explains:

... [R]aids and deportations were initiated by the Guardia Rural [Rural Guard] ... [A]ntillanos, particularly Haitians, were tracked down in Oriente province by bounty hunters eager to collect the rewards that had been promised to those who helped in their capture. Candidates for repatriation were chosen arbitrarily. They included Haitians who were employed in the sugar or coffee sectors, as well as others who were small landowners. Many of the Haitian coffee cultivators in the Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo areas had lived in Cuba for over 15 years. Cases abounded in which deportees lost belongings, animals, and wages or other monies owed them. They often had to sell their earthly possessions for a song — providing juicy pickings for employers, merchants, and local functionaries... Most of the deportees were not even allowed to alert their families or collect their belongings before being moved to deportation centers in Santiago ... Fidel Castro, then a seven-year-old Santiago schoolboy, recalled the sad spectacle of Haitian deportees leaving Santiago.... (1998:106-107)

McLeod argues that repatriations of the 1930s forced many Haitians deep into the Sierra Maestra mountains and other inaccessible rural areas. He calls them “modern-day maroons” to emphasize their isolation (McLeod 1998:614). Some landowners helped Haitian workers hide in the forest in isolated areas, where many remained for years. It was an advantage to landowners to keep a cheap workforce. Those aiding the Haitians were generally not business elites such as the owners of *centrales* but instead subcontractors and smaller landowners who supplied the bigger *centrales* (James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007). McLeod maintains that “Many retreated to isolated communities ... in the more remote areas of the provinces of Camagüey and Oriente. That so many Haitians have retained traditional forms of dance, housing, religion, and speech into the 1960s and beyond testifies to the viability, strength, and cohesion of these secluded Haitian communities” (1998:606).

#### Jamaicans in Cuba as a Foil for the Haitian Experience

The 50% Law had been imposed for all workers, but as historian Alejandro de la Fuente observes, all workers—Spanish, Haitian and Jamaican—were not equally prosecuted (2001:104). The Spanish had long been lionized as contributing to the desirable *blanqueamiento* of the nation, and Jamaicans had greater political and cultural ties and resources in Cuba.

Although both Haitians and Jamaicans were dark-skinned and Antillean, Jamaicans were British citizens, and as such they were better protected. When feeling maltreated, they were able to turn to consular officials with the expectation of support (Carr 1998:90, McLeod 1998:607, McGillivray 2009:114). During the repatriation period, the British and their colonial officials assisted poor West Indians who wished to return home and simultaneously leaned on the Cubans to secure the opportunity to remain in Cuba for West Indians who wanted it (McLeod 1998:612,

McGillivray 2009:114). Haitians, on the other hand, sometimes received help from officials but most often did not. Many chose not to seek help from their diplomatic representatives at all (Casey 2012:224-225, 237-238).

Casey notes that a tiny, separate class of Haitian émigrés and expats existed in cities—in particular, he considers their presence in Santiago and Guantánamo—from which they maintained cultural and political ties with Haiti. Although they claimed to be the exception to the stereotype of Haitian workers in Cuba and, in fact, did not acknowledge the cane workers as members of their community, they claimed to be the voice of Haitians in Cuba, attempting to affect how Cuba was portrayed in the Haitian press and how Haitians appeared in the Cuban press. They also tried to have a hand in Haitian domestic affairs via political organizing. “Regular steamship traffic carried people and goods between Haiti and the eastern regions of Cuba, facilitating the circulation of letters and printed materials between the countries and permitting lettered Haitians to remain in close contact with Haiti” (Casey 2012:237). Their responses to the stereotyping of Haitians in the Cuban press as unskilled, unlettered, uncultured, and politically unstable was to hold themselves up as counterexamples, rather than to attack the stereotypes themselves. “The distance that literate, urban-dwelling Haitians in Cuba sought to create between themselves and their rural counterparts is revealed by their estimate that in 1932, the ‘Haitian colony in Santiago de Cuba’ consisted of ‘approximately 180 members’—a statistic which ignored the tens of thousands of agricultural laborers who traveled to Cuba annually” (Casey 2012:244). During the era of repatriation, most Haitian consuls were worse than useless, providing little protection for their cane-cutting constituents and some even profiting from the process (Casey 2012:235).

Jamaicans had more in common with the business and political elites of the island. They spoke English, the same language as the British and American businesspeople and the second language of many upper- and middle-class Cubans. Their ability to communicate with their employers provided additional economic opportunities as household help, chauffeurs, gardeners, language tutors, school teachers or nannies, opportunities that were precious during the *tiempo muerto*, the rainy months each year when there was no work in the cane industry. McGillivray explains that Jamaicans “tended to have higher education levels and shared the same language as the upper-level American administrators and engineers some of them cooked and cleaned for; both education and proximity to the English-speaking elite allowed them to demand better pay (2009:113). Perhaps because of the domestic jobs available to Jamaican women, the gender ratio of immigrants was more even among Jamaicans than Haitians. When many Jamaican immigrant laborers found themselves without work as a result of the 50% Law, they were able to find jobs at the US naval base in Guantánamo (Lippman 2009:44-45). They also shared the Protestant faith of many of the British and American business people, landowners, and managers, which was considered more “respectable” (read: less African) than Haitian Vodú. Although some North American and Cuban Episcopalians created separate services for poor black cane workers, Episcopal communities encouraged the shared faith, in part, at least, as a contribution to social control (McLeod 1998). By participating in the church, British West Indian immigrants were able to set themselves apart from their “superstitious” Haitian co-workers (McLeod 1998:611). McLeod also points out that literacy contributed to Jamaican integration into Cuban society. Cuban immigration statistics indicate that fewer than 16 percent of Haitians arriving between 1912 and 1929 were literate, compared with nearly 92 percent of British West Indians, who

usually had been the recipients of a formal education in their birth country and who sought formal schooling for their children once in Cuba.

In other contrasts with British West Indians, Haitian immigrants spoke Haitian Creole, a language largely unfamiliar to most of their employers and new countrymen and women, and practiced a religion unfamiliar to the elites of Cuba. Vodú served their small, sometimes hidden, communities well with its decentralized, flexible nature. *Haitianos* could retain their traditional religious practices, which gave them some degree of control over their lives in Cuba. Because the main focus of Vodú since the colonial era has been healing, rural Haitians used their religion as a system for dealing with suffering. But local peasants considered Vodú intimidating and potent, although it was not remarkably different from Folk Catholic, Spiritist, or African-inspired spiritual practices common in rural Cuba. And the elites and the press vilified Haitians and their practices. This tended to isolate them from the larger culture, as did the practice of educating their children informally within their communities. Vodú also, however, fostered the ties within the Haitian communities, where worship and ritual obligations encouraged social cohesion. In short, *haitianos* came together around Vodú (McLeod 1998:610).

McLeod maintains that Haitians' illiteracy, religious practices, and lack of education subjected them to racist policies by plantation officials, especially compared to the English-speaking, Protestant, more literate British West Indians who also arrived to work in the sugar industry (2000). Another factor was Jamaicans' inclination to organize socio-politically to promote their economic and social well-being. They had sufficient stock in the system to participate via its common channels of change. Some organized around Protestant church activities; some were Garveyites; others participated in unions, even organizing their own. McLeod articulates, "Although they continued to face racial discrimination and economic

hardship, British West Indians formed a variety of social institutions in the effort to control their lives” (1998:607).

There are few hints in the written record of Haitians creating associations to fight for their rights or in cooperation with Cuban civil society groups. Nor do we see evidence that they organized with other workers, tenant farmers, or landowners who might have been disposed to help them. Casey remarks, “Haitians seem to have participated only minimally in labor unions or other formal labor organizations. Although they were invited into the ranks of the *Union de Obreros Antillanos* (UOA) [a labor union organized by Jamaicans], few, if any, actually joined. In sum, those who explore official channels of redress and resistance show that Haitians were largely absent” (2012:13).

#### Haitians’ Experiences in Cuba

The wave of Haitian *braceros* began coming to Cuba not long after the 1912 massacre by government troops of the founding members of the Partido Independiente de Color, when leaders Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonnet were assassinated and thousands of Afro-Cubans, more than a few unaffiliated with the party, were killed. These *braceros* found not only heightened racial tension in their new home, but also exaggerated racial prejudice (de la Fuente 2009:50-53). Repeated U.S. occupations since the War of Independence (1899-1902, 1906-1909, 1912, and a permanent U.S. presence at Guantanamo Bay established in 1903) had brought Jim Crow-style policies to businesses and government, including the exclusion of blacks from working certain jobs in both the public and private sectors and from entering certain buildings or public places (Cole 1980:4-5). U.S. Marines would be present again from 1917 to 1923 to continue their influence on Cuban racism. Historian Aviva Chomsky highlights Cuban racism and changing

notions of race, positing that Haitian migrant workers in particular were seen as unsuitable to incorporate into the Cuban polity:

Independence-era ideologies held that sovereignty depended upon blacks and whites fighting together... In the first decade after independence, white commentators buried this belief and argued that only white immigration could create a Cuba strong enough to be truly sovereign; the Partido Independiente de Color, which sought equality for blacks, was banned as divisive and finally crushed. After the 1912 massacre black Cubans reiterated their claims for equal rights and citizenship based on their patriotism and independence-era ideologies. In response, white intellectuals shifted the terms of *blanqueamiento*: they argued that Cuban blacks were not only assimilable, but in fact *not really black* and that the growing Haitian immigration threatened Cuban sovereignty by *introducing* inassimilable blacks into the Cuban polity. (2000:421 emphasis in original)

One of the few who spoke up on behalf of the Antillean immigrants at the time was Afro-Cuban intellectual Armando Plá. He advanced an inclusive black identity in which Cuban blacks evinced a love for nation that made them equal Cuban citizens. Furthermore, Plá contended, migrants could become patriotic citizens, arguing, “[t]hey say that Haitians and Jamaicans cannot feel love for this land...these assertions are very far from the truth” (in Chomsky 2000:450).<sup>41</sup> In addition to general prejudice against blacks, Cubans and others throughout the Caribbean and the Americas harbored stereotypes of Haitians that linked them to poverty, illiteracy, contagion, and witchcraft.<sup>42</sup> De la Fuente stresses the bigotry that underpinned complaints about migration, noting, “Antillean immigration was compared to an invasion of deadly germs” (2009:47). Espronceda remarks that Haitian migrants were associated with malaria (2001:14). McLeod uncovers details of quarantine policies in his 2010 article “We Cubans Are Obligated Like Cats to Have a Clean Face’: Malaria, Quarantine, and Race in Neocolonial Cuba, 1898-1940.” He

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<sup>41</sup> Chapter Four explores the tension between present-day Haitian descendants sense of Cuban-ness and deep enthusiasm for Cuba coupled with their simultaneous enduring identification with and nostalgia for Haiti, thus offering readers a contemporary update on Plá’s arguments.

<sup>42</sup> For example, rumors of disease led Cuban authorities to set up quarantine stations to process incoming Antillean migrants. See McLeod (2010) and Casey (2012) for analysis of the racial and ethnic bias of public health policies and also for discussion of witchcraft scares trumpeted in the Cuban press.



argues that paranoia about the spread of communicable diseases from “primitive” Haiti to “modern” Cuba was perhaps more about exclusion and social control than actual logics of public health. He also explains:

Dread of a black uprising proved most easily transferrable to the *haitiano* population, since fear of an Afro-Cuban revolt dated back to the successful Haitian Revolution over a century earlier and was further fueled by the contemporary guerrilla war waged by *caco* forces against the U.S. occupation of Haiti. A corollary to this fear was the belief that *antillanos* engaged in unruly and criminal behavior. In a 1923 speech to the Academia de Ciencias Medicas, Fisicas, y Naturales in Havana, Dr. Jorge Le-Roy y Cassá warned that Antillean immigration introduced “vice and crime,” especially violent crime, into the Cuban populace. (1998: 601)

Haitians suffered multiple discriminations as uneducated black foreigners from a country with a reputation for political instability, populated by peasants who clung to purportedly unenlightened African beliefs and philosophies. De la Fuente explains that Haitian spirituality was deemed a threat to modernity and progress and notes that the U.S. occupation legitimized the repression of African-inspired religion. Also, sensationalized stories of blacks kidnapping white children for purposes of *brujería* (witchcraft) or malevolent rites circulated in the Cuban press (2009:50). Haitians occupied the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, and Casey comments that “Haitian immigrants, even more than other groups, were associated strongly with the stereotype of impoverished cane cutters who remained distant from other groups” (2012:131). He describes these immigrants as “shadowy figures” who are broadly characterized in both Haitian and Cuban research “as a homogenous group of sugar cane cutters” even though they participated in many areas of the Cuban economy (Casey 2012:4-5).

When the laborers first arrived, many lived in barracks and labor camps. Most planned to work for a temporary period in order to save money and return to their countries with the resources to marry or buy a farm. But, as with Manuel, the protagonist of Haitian novelist

Jacques Roumain's classic *Masters of the Dew*, who returned penniless to his native village after fifteen years in Cuba, the hoped-for opportunities did not always materialize. Some sugar refineries or *centrales* paid workers using a system of company scrip that was redeemable only at company stores, and inflated prices for basic goods were common.<sup>43</sup> Because most Haitian laborers were illiterate, they were hampered in understanding and negotiating their contracts. Getting an economic toehold was further complicated by periods of inactivity between harvests. Even laborers migrating internally between the *zafra*, or sugar harvest (most active from January to May), and the coffee harvest (generally September to November) still faced long periods with little work. Also, as the *braceros* gradually established themselves in Cuba, working small plots of land during periods of unemployment, acquiring livestock, forming relationships and marrying locally, returning to Haiti became an increasingly distant dream.

Like any stereotype, the image of the faceless, socially isolated cane cutter doesn't hold up well to close examination. Some laborers indeed did just pick cane and live in barracks in company towns and return home after each season. But even they formed relationships in their new environment. Haitians lived on sugar plantations in conjunction with people of other nationalities (Casey 2012:130). On smaller plantations, in particular, segregating workers was impractical. Also, many Haitians engaged in a variety of activities to augment their cutting cane income. McGillivray finds that sugar mills workers' wives "grew fruit and vegetables to sell, did laundry for employees, and set up makeshift cafeterias to sell snacks and drinks" and notes that such unofficial commerce could provide important extra income and also offered workers

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<sup>43</sup> While paying workers with company scrip was made illegal in Cuba by the 1909 Arteaga Act (McGillivray 2009:102), the practice appears to have continued as late as the 1950s. Elderly Haitians in Cuba complained about being paid with scrip or "tickets" in interviews conducted by Fanhooome (2007:78-79) with "vales y fichas" (vouchers and tokens) in interviews by Sevillano (2007:66) and McGillivray records the use of tokens by two of the largest sugar companies, Chaparra and Delicias, throughout the republican period (2009:102-103). Whether or not scrip was in use, inflated prices in company stores were common (Hornel 1978:238).

options in addition to the goods and prices in company stores (2009:142-143). Despite marginalization, racism, and anti-Haitian prejudice, Cubans and Haitian immigrants interacted in a number of ways. Casey cites accounts of Haitians using prostitutes in sugar towns, gaming and gambling, playing music, participating in various activities that make up a life (2011). Alarcon and Corbea suggest that rural communities may have lacked the Jim Crow-types of segregation seen in Havana, asserting, “the rural Cuban poor did not develop any particular form of discrimination or rejection, even though there existed certain barriers, or a segregation, due to language and cultural differences” (Alarcón and Corbea n.d.). Casey notes that individuals often transcend the forces acting upon them and are more complex than tightly edited characterizations: “Even when borders are enforced and migration is strictly controlled, migrants act on their own aspirations and exert some degree of control over their movements. Scholars have shown that migration is influenced by kin and social networks, individual creativity, evaluations of personal risks, available alternatives to migration, and migrants’ aspirations, not just state policies, capital flows, or the false hopes offered by recruiters” (Casey 2012:19-20).

Haitian migrants exerted agency over their lives in a number of ways. Although they were recruited to work on sugar plantations, *haitianos* also engaged in coffee picking, smallholding, and town and urban travel. Some returned to Haiti, and some sent for relatives from Haiti or brought them on successive trips to Cuba. Some tried to maintain contact with kin at home. Many formed new families in Cuba, marrying and having children. Families had economic strategies, like keeping animals and picking coffee, to supplement seasonal sugar harvest work.

They also were not “unskilled” laborers but migrants who brought with them experience and “specialized knowledge in harvesting coffee and sugar” (Casey 2012:26). Although they

were recruited to work in the sugar industry, Haitians were so highly regarded as participants in the resurgence of Cuban coffee that during repatriation roundups, with Cuban xenophobia and nationalism at its apex, “some Haitian coffee workers were spared deportation because they sustained an industry that was widely perceived as being authentically Cuban, as opposed to sugar, an industry frequently associated with [profiting] the United States” (Casey 2012:28). They also appeared to exhibit higher productivity and efficiency. Because they were used to overcoming bad soil, they could farm the tiniest bits of free dirt on the patio or between boulders, and they could do so without a lot of equipment, perhaps simply a machete (James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007).<sup>44</sup> Cubans only knew how to cultivate in relatively large and fertile spaces. Also, Cubans spent a lot of effort and time clearing forests. Haitians, it seemed, could grow crops anywhere. And Haitians were believed to be better able to survive in the *intemperie*, that is outside, in bad weather, and under more precarious conditions (James, Millet and Alarcón 2007).

They were able to parlay not only their skill, but also a sense of mystery and power they could derive from some of the stereotypes about their religion. James, Millet, and Alarcón (2007) argue that while Haitians faced discrimination, they were simultaneously admired, even feared, for particular skills. Alarcón argues that their renown as storytellers, skills with medicinal herbs, spectacular festivals, and “strong” magic also functioned as defense mechanisms against bigotry (1988). Casey finds evidence of Cubans consulting Haitian ritual specialists for cures, noting that reputed healing abilities gave Haitians social status because Haitians had better facility than rural Cubans with medicinal plants (2011). Ethnobotanists Volpato, Godínez, and Beyra conducted a study of the use of plants and foods for medicinal and religious purposes by elderly Haitians living in rural areas of Camagüey province. They found that local residents credited Haitians

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<sup>44</sup> See Karen Richman (2005) for discussion of the pride taken by Haitian peasants in “intercropping” skills, for example growing corn or other food plants inside fields of cash crops. Sevillano notes that Cubans in Guantánamo identified cultivating foodstuffs in tiny spaces or out of season as a “Haitian” skill (2007:65).

with a deep knowledge of herbs, and for the introduction of *tifey* or *gwog*, a drink made from herbs steeped in rum, also sometimes called a “bottle of herbs” or *boutey racin* (2009).<sup>45</sup> Because of their limited access to scientific medicine in Haiti at the time of the migration, *braceros* had to rely on medicinal plant knowledge and could use flora to cure illnesses that Cubans couldn’t. “When it came to healing, Haitians’ services were even requested by white Cubans, suggesting that whites’ participation in African religious and healing rituals is not as recent a phenomenon as scholars have imagined” (Casey 2012:210).

James, Millet and Alarcón contend that Haitians used these skills to impress the Cuban peasants. To ensure their safety and security in a strange land, many of their customs had elements of the spectacular, the audacious. Haitians took advantage of their reputation as being marginal, illiterate, sorcerers, uncivilized, and capable of anything, cultivating the image that they were dangerous, not to be messed with (2007). Carr suggests, “Haitians knew how to exploit their sinister reputation to heighten the cultural separation between themselves and the Cuban-born population. And when all else failed, they could use fear of the ‘exotic’ and ‘savage’ to secure respect and minimize harassment. Moreover, their prestige in matters of magic and herbal medicine could earn Haitians the respect of fellow workers and even colonos [farmers]. In other words, Haitians could turn marginality into an asset” (1998:95).

Haitian migrants’ nomadic lives gave them at least one social advantage: Haitians brought news and also new ideas from other towns and provinces to the Cuban peasants. The Cuban *campesino* was fixed. Haitians followed sugar and coffee harvests, from as far west as Ciego de Ávila province all the way to Guantánamo. In addition to news, they might, for

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<sup>45</sup> During my own field research, I found that many Vodú musicians and ritual specialists enjoyed showing off their *tifey* flasks and boasting about its tonic qualities or superior flavor. Offered a sip, I was often called upon to compare my host’s decoction favorably to that of competitors, and found that guarding secret recipes, preparing these drinks, and sharing the results is still an important social praxis.

example, bring a cock that had fought in 100 cockfight theaters instead of 10. The Haitian could move through lands and roads unfamiliar and distant to sedentary Cuban peasants; he was traveled; he had even crossed the sea. He “knew what was happening in other places when Cubans were ignorant, [and] his network of countryman also kept him informed of doings in distant places, it was an unofficial information network” (James, Millet and Alarcón 2007:86).

Once they had the floor, they didn’t only bring news, they created a wonderous place of origin. In their stories told at night at the barracks of the coffee or sugar plantations, Haiti became a legendary place of bounty, dignity, and resources. Most Cubans at the time couldn’t have known it to be different. I have found that descendants in general still do not tell stories of adverse circumstances that drove their fathers from Haiti: poverty, oppression, U.S. imperialism, deforestation, underdevelopment. Instead, they say that they have heard Haiti is beautiful and it seems a “dear” place to them.

Haitians and Cubans also mingled in areas such as music and celebration. Haitians brought the dance processions and music of Gagá bands, which integrated into Cuban peasant culture. Gagá performances offered a connection between the Haitian settlements and rural Cuban communities. During Holy Week, Gagá became a kind of carnival of the sugar enclaves, and costumed bands paraded, singing catchy and racy ditties, showing off fancy footwork and feats such as juggling machetes or eating fire. Cuban ethnographer Bernarda Sevillano proposes that Gagá was “common and accepted, danced in the bateyes as a ‘carnavalito’ and an element of local culture...until the end of the 1940s” in rural Guantánamo province (Sevillano 2007:46-47), and observes that when performers executed acts of daring or cavorted with blades, it “left observers astounded, and supported the notion that Haitians were adept sorcerers” (2007:68). She also notes that while Cubans came out to watch the processions in public villages contexts, Gagá

was also a private, ethnically sequestered activity, because “afterwards, the Haitians retired to their spaces to celebrate and do their magics” (2007:74).

There also was interchange between Vodú, brought by the twentieth century migrants, and the spiritual systems in use in the rural areas where Haitians settled, including Spiritism and folk Catholic practices. Not only did Cuban peasants sometimes consult Haitians who were knowledgeable about herbs and cures, but healers were often spiritual practitioners who offered not only physical cures but also psychological counseling and otherworldly interventions. Casey, challenging the stereotype of Haitians’ isolation in early twentieth century Cuba, proposes that at the level of local communities, “Haitians and Cubans participated in a variety of ritual practices together, thus creating their own religious communities and forms of memory” (2012:199). He also posits that Haitians sometimes “served as the religious leaders in these heterogeneous groups of practitioners” and hypothesizes, “Haitians’ and Cubans’ tendency to practice together may have been motivated by the magico-religious power and leadership often attributed to the former” (2012:202-203).

Vodú practices, by virtue of their great flexibility, were instrumental as a resource supporting the Haitian community, and also as an instrument of cultural affirmation. Also, secluded and tight-knit rural communities helped Haitians and their descendants maintain their music, dance, festivals, spiritual practices, language, culinary, and farming customs (James, Millet and Alarcón 2007). Another explanation is that the forced repatriations of the 1930s may have countered the pull of Cuban culture by pushing Haitians who wanted to stay in Cuba and many of their family members into hiding in isolated areas. This, in turn, could have tipped the scale toward retaining Haitian ways.

The story of Pablo Milanés and his father Arsenault Silnet at the beginning of this chapter confirms published accounts of the era of repatriations and of Haitians' experiences in Cuba. While Silnet had to hide during the period of forced deportation—leaving his wife afraid and alone with their young children—he eventually resolved his status and prevailed over adversity. A successful farmer and entrepreneur, Silnet purchased four farms, ran a shop, and owned a bar. His marriage to a local Cuban woman resulted in a large and successful family who today keep language, herbal lore, spiritual practices, and other traditions flourishing.

Most Haitians who formed families in Cuba did so with the local poor, including other laborers and sharecroppers and other Antillean immigrants (Alarcón and Corbea n.d.). This incorporation into Cuban society resulted in common goals and culture. Children of Haitian immigrants showed marked preference to mix or marry other first or second generation descendants of Haitian immigrants (Espronceda 2001) although there were attempts to facilitate unions/marriages of descendants not with other so-called *pichones*, but with Cubans (James, Millet and Alarcón 2007). James, Millet and Alarcón note that since most Haitian workers were men who married Cuban women, Cuban women were the center of many households. Some of these women had children by various men during their lifetimes and, as a strategy of “moving up,” some also had progeny with non-Haitians. This resulted in large extended families tied by blood of various heritage, joined by bonds of reciprocity and familiarity (2007:99). They argue that this positively affected Haitian descendants' self-confidence and capacity for action and social initiative.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> While I am not sure about the logic of this argument, it seems oddly true. For example, the Milanés brothers are the very picture of suave and confident successful local leaders, and they have created large blended families. However, I observed during my fieldwork that many Cubans come from families where either or both of their parents had children with different partners, and it is not clear to me this is any more true of people of Haitian heritage.



Who were the Cuban women who married the Haitian men? Language or “mother tongue” and values and religion, are popularly conceived as stemming from a mother’s care, as she has more typically been the parent at home with children. If this is the case, how has Haitian Creole survived so long in Cuba? My own field work hints that many Cuban women who married Haitian men learned to speak Creole. These Cuban women also learned to cook Haitian foods and acquired agricultural attitudes and techniques, such as toughness, ability to work in the “interperie” [outdoors], intercropping, growing in very small places. In general, the Cuban women who married Haitian men seem to have picked up many Haitian skills and passed them on to the Haitian-Cuban children of the union.

#### Haitian Migration in the 1940s and 1950s

Haitians continued to migrate to Cuba in the years surrounding World War II and during the turbulence of the Duvalier regime in the 1950s, albeit in much smaller numbers. Some of these emigrants were petty traders and merchants. When the Cuban Revolution in 1959 curtailed regular boat traffic between the two islands as the Cuban government distanced itself from the right-wing regime of François Duvalier, many lost contact with family members in Haiti.

I met two such families during my time in Cuba. Neimys Bicet Ruiz lives in the Sorribe neighborhood of Santiago de Cuba. Her father came to Cuba in 1957 to engage in trade and make money, leaving his wife and young boys behind in Haiti for what he thought would be a temporary period. But after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 he found travel to Haiti unattainable. He eventually remarried, to a Cuban woman of Haitian descent, and had one child with her: Neimys. The father, already advanced in age when Neimys was born, passed away when she was a young woman, and she remained curious about her Haitian relatives. She explained to me that a

Cuban doctor who participated in a government medical “mission” to Haiti helped her by locating people who knew her family and were able to put her in contact with her father’s older children. Two of her brothers were still alive, and both had emigrated. One lived in Belize, the other in Boston. I first visited Jean Nerva Durce Bicet in Boston’s Mattapan neighborhood in 2010, bringing him a photo of his father in his later years from Neimys, along with photos and a video greeting in Creole from Neimys herself. Teary-eyed, Jean Nerva exclaimed that he was moved to see a photo of the father he and his siblings had ceased to hear from not long after his move to Cuba, and murmured that the whole saga of family separation was very sad. However, he was pleased to have a younger sister. From time to time, Jean Nerva sends Neimys financial assistance, and they occasionally speak on the phone.

In the coffee growing village of Ramon de Guaninao, I met Veronica Sèlima, who showed me her carefully preserved Haitian passport, which indicated that she had arrived in Cuba in 1957.



Figure 8 – Veronica’s passport on the left, with one of her Cuban-born sons on the right. ©Viddal 2013

Veronica, in a still-noticable Haitian accent, told me her story: “I am from Posali in the south of Haiti, but have lived in Cuba since I was 16. I have four grown children, all Cuban, but they speak Creole. My uncle was already in Cuba. I came on a tourist visa to work for him and to earn money. But, then came the Revolution. So I had to stay in Cuba. Eventually my uncle died. But I made a new family here, there are many Haitians.”<sup>47</sup> Veronica revealed that she often wonders what became of her parents and siblings in Haiti. Loosing touch with them was heartbreaking. But, she clarified, “I’m happy here, everyone loves me, they call me “la haitianita” (the “little Haitian lady” a term of endearment, which refers to Victoria’s diminutive stature). She continued, “look I have a little coffee shop; everyone stops at my house when they enter town to buy a *cafecito*.” During our visit, I unfolded a contemporary map of Haiti and we were able to identify Posali (Port Salut in French). One of Veronica’s adult children, Modesto, an experienced Vodú drummer and a performer in the town’s folkloric dance troupe, explained that his mother maintains many homeland customs, including feeding her family spirits and hosting fiestas, or *fet*, in their honor.

While most *haitiano-cubanos* are descendants of migrants who arrived in Cuba as cane cutters or coffee pickers between 1913 and the early 1930s, Haitians continued to arrive, albeit in smaller numbers, until mid-century. Their stories of loosing contact with family in Haiti is a sad one, although some, as we see from Neimys and Jean Nerva, have been able to re-establish contact in resourceful ways.

#### Haitians in Cuba After the Castro Revolution of 1959

The decade after the Revolution brought many changes to Cuba’s Haitian heritage communities as the new regime focused on rural development through literacy campaigns, public

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<sup>47</sup> From conversations on 19 March 2010 and 10 January 2013.

health initiatives, new educational opportunities, and the expansion of infrastructure and services in rural areas during the 1960s. In 1967, as recompense to thousands of Haitian-Cubans for being “vexed and discriminated in their triple condition as peons agricultural, black, and foreign,” monthly payments of 40 pesos a month are awarded for life to the *braceros* (Decreto 202 of 28th of October 1967 by the Ministry of Labor).<sup>48</sup>

Interest in the arts and traditions of this ethnic minority, however, was largely absent until the following decade.<sup>49</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, beginning in the 1970s, professional dance companies sent research teams to visit the *bateyes*<sup>50</sup> in rural sugar and coffee producing areas in order to learn Haitian music and dance traditions and adapt this repertoire for inclusion in their own choreographies. The 1980s saw a surge of interest by scholars in *haitiano-cubanos*. A particular research institution in Santiago province —the Casa del Caribe— began to conduct research in Haitian communities. Founded by an intrepid self-taught ethnographer named Joel James Figarola, the Casa del Caribe and its leader argued for a new vision of regional identity that included the contributions of Haitians.

One of the central elements of the Haitian experience in Cuba is the way that their cultural contributions were ultimately recognized as a valid element of national identity through the actions of folklorists, culture promoters, and Haitians themselves. This has accelerated since the post-Soviet epoch (known in Cuba as the Special Period) as we will learn in Chapters Three

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<sup>48</sup> In the 1970 Cuban census, there were still 22,500 persons living who had been born in Haiti. In 2002, there were still 66 persons claiming benefits under this law, which was increased to 90 pesos a month (Pérez de la Riva 1979, Alarcón and Corbea n.d.).

<sup>49</sup> Two essays by Alberto Pedro Diaz profiling the customs of Haitian immigrants in the province of Camagüey published in *Étología y folklore* in 1966 and 1967 are notable exceptions, as are discussions of the Haitian presence in economic histories treating sugar production.

<sup>50</sup> A *batey* is a term used in the Spanish Caribbean to refer to workers’ quarters near cane fields or sugar refineries. Today, many Haitian descendants still live and work near sugar towns. In rural zones of coffee production, the clustered homes of Haitian descendants tend to be referred to as *bateyes* as well.

and Four. While Haitians have interrelated with Cuban society since their arrival, it was largely within private and local domains. It was not until their entry into the world of staged folklore that the Haitian heritage population took a sustained, positive role in Cuban public discourse at the regional and national level.

## Conclusion

Understanding the forces behind Haitian migration to Cuba during the great sugar boom of the early twentieth century and the state of Cuba when the *braceros* arrived provides a lens for considering how Haitians adapted to their new environment, as well as how they shaped portions of that environment. They functioned as agents of cultural intermixture and helped create a regional identity that differentiated *oriente* from *occidente* in Cuba. These *braceros* arrived in Cuba with a strongly developed sense of being Haitian. The earlier eighteenth century migrants, on the other hand, not only the whites and their household slaves and servants, but also free people of color, were considered denizens of a French colony. Discrimination and difficult conditions met the twentieth century laborers, and, unlike their Jamaican counterparts, many were the victims of forced repatriation in the 1930s, losing what little they had accumulated. During the epoch of repatriation, some retreated deeper into rural areas to distance themselves from authority, adding to their repute as an exotic and primitive “other.”

Haitians who settled in Cuba developed various strategies for survival, and some even thrived. Some of the cultural strategies include in-marrying with Cubans, cultivating a reputation as being agile with machetes, physically powerful and tough, and practitioners of a different and rather spectacular religion. Haitians also were able to grow crops in challenging zones and use medicinal herbs to advantage. Because they nomadically followed the cane and coffee harvests

(even after they had a plot of land to call their own), Haitians brought news to communities and knowledge of far-flung locales. They were both discriminated against and respected.

The spiritual practice of Vodú continues to mark Cubans of Haitian descent today, although the religion has undergone change. As priests born in Haiti died away, the use of Creole began declining. As families move to larger towns and cities and Havana, the network of Vodú believers expands to include non-Haitian Cubans, although for many of these it is not a primary religious system. Today, folkloric groups and research institutions also bring Vodú to the public, and there is a surge of interest on the part of young people of Haitian descent in learning the Haitian language and the performance traditions and customs of their heritage. In the twenty-first century, many people of Haitian descent in Cuba continue to identify with a “hyphenated-ethnicity,” feeling that they are Cuban but also Haitian. Their music and dance traditions and spiritual practices, once acknowledged only in limited local environments, have entered the public arena under the rubric of folklore, and continue to expand into new areas and contexts in Cuba.

## Chapter Three

### Vodú Chic: Haitian Culture and the Folkloric Imaginary in Socialist Cuba

#### Introduction

During the first three decades of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of Antillean workers—the majority Haitians—arrived in Cuba seeking employment in the expanding sugar industry of the newly independent Cuban republic. While some of these laborers returned to Haiti, many settled permanently in Cuba. How did Haitian migrants and their descendants integrate into Cuban society during ensuing decades? Historically, Haitian laborers were marginal, disenfranchised, and occupied the lowest socio-economic status in Cuban society. Haitian spiritual practices were misunderstood and feared; even practitioners of other Afro-Caribbean religions such as Santería often characterized Haitian Vodú<sup>51</sup> as diabolical, powerful, and potentially dangerous. Similarly, officials scapegoated Haitians to quell anxieties produced by the social and economic transformations in post-colonial Cuba. As economic conditions in Cuba worsened during the worldwide economic downturn of the 1930s, Haitians were targeted for summary deportations under successive regimes.<sup>52</sup> Until relatively recently, the maintenance of Haitian spiritual beliefs, music, dance, and language in Cuba were associated with rural isolation and poverty. Ethnographers who focused on these communities conceptualized them in terms of villagers in the mountains of the eastern provinces preserving their grandparents' picturesque or bizarre Haitian customs, including Vodú.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Vodú” is the common spelling convention in Spanish. English language scholars typically refer to Haitian spiritual practices as “Vodou,” and the genre of Hollywood horror entertainment as “voodoo.”

<sup>52</sup> See Lundhal (1982), McLeod (2000), James, Millet, and Alarcón (2007).

<sup>53</sup> Including Pedro (1967), Corbea (1987), Guancho and Moreno (1988), James, Millet, and Alarcón (2007).

Today however, the continuation of Haitian customs is no longer linked with isolation, but exactly the opposite: performance troupes, heritage festivals, art exhibitions, the circulation of religious specialists, collaborations with research centers and academia, endorsement by music promoters, and the tourism industry. In socialist Cuba, “folklore” is a valuable resource. Traditional cultural practices including music, dance, and religious rituals have been re-imagined, or “folklorized,” for the public stage. Folklore confirms the unity of the multi-racial and multi-ethnic nation. It demonstrates Cuba’s uniqueness and authenticity. It attracts tourists. This important “imaginary of folklore” creates new careers and novel opportunities for people of Haitian descent in Cuba. Although some Cubans of Haitian descent hide their background, others proudly claim their heritage and this inclination is growing. Policy makers and culture brokers both within the socialist state and internationally have begun to notice, valorize, and promote the arts and traditions of this ethnic sub-group. *Haitiano-cubanos* are becoming more visible, particularly in the arena of cultural performance, as folkloric dance and music troupes, heritage festivals, and arts projects highlighting the Haitian presence proliferate. Also, Haitian spiritual practices are shifting into new environments, as ritual specialists from rural areas increasingly travel to cities to offer consultations and tend to a widening network of spiritual godchildren.

Anthropologist J. Lorand Matory proposes that links with metropolitan cultural institutions, scholars, and international collaborators can in fact play critical roles in shaping the cultural identity of marginalized communities. He argues, “lifeways, traditions, and the social boundaries they substantiate endure not despite their involvement in translocal dialogues but because of it (2005:1) and contends, “we can no longer treat geographical isolation as a condition of cultural reproduction (2005:2).



This chapter examines the forces that have shaped the relationship of Haitians as an ethnic minority to national identity in Cuba during the decades since the 1959 Cuban Revolution. The lives of Haitians living in Cuba and their descendants changed in the 1960s as the new socialist government undertook rural development projects and social initiatives including campaigns to expand literacy, healthcare, and infrastructure. But it wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s that Haitian performance traditions began to enter the folkloric imaginary in Cuba. By "folkloric imaginary" I refer to the performance traditions, customs, arts, and spiritual traditions, or corpus of "folklore" generally envisaged by Cubans as belonging to and within their country. The Cuban economic collapse following the end of Soviet subsidies added new pressures to the concept of *cubanidad*, or Cuban-ness. The nation's "economy of folklore" became increasingly important as the state reordered and tourism was promoted as an important source of income. The folkloric imaginary and the economy of folklore were key processes by which Haitians and their cultural practices came to be acknowledged as an element within Cuba's cultural mix.

The "folklorization"<sup>54</sup> of arts and religion has set in motion the formation of dance troupes, musical bands, heritage festivals, exhibitions, and publications. As public arenas offer practitioner/performers new resources and new motivations to deepen their craft, share it, and identify it with a regional or national legacy, they create an "economy of folklore" while reshaping what it means to be of Haitian descent in Cuba. This "economy of folklore" creates new careers and novel opportunities for participants. In the staging of spiritual practices as folklore, for example, these practices expand and take on new meanings in front of wider

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<sup>54</sup> Hagedorn's term "folklorized" refers to a double process of removal from an original. Cuban scholars dub Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices "folklore" to articulate religion within a socialist paradigm. Hence, a performance group staging sacred dances is yet one more step removed from spiritual practice: what is already considered "folklore" by commentators has been further adapted or "folklorized" for performance. However, I use "folklorization" rather than Hagedorn's "folklorization" to connote an emic, not an etic, concept of "folklore." For practitioners, since spiritual practice is "real," a dance troupe or public performance is only one step removed; it is a "folklorized" version of religion.

audiences, becoming theater, art, entertainment, and cultural currency as well as expressions of devotion and technologies of communication with the divine. These transformations have come about through the visions and projects of various cultural agents, including performers, intellectuals, researchers, and members of haitiano-cubano communities.

### The Role of Folklore in the Socialist State

When Fidel Castro's guerilla army toppled the regime of president Fulgencio Batista and took power in January 1959, the new government took charge of a nation rife with social inequities and class and race disparities. Many citizens lacked access to basic health care and education. Illiteracy was high, particularly in rural areas. Poet and literary laureate Nancy Morejón claims that "Cubans are characterized for having sought to build a nation that is homogeneous in its heterogeneity, defined by a political end beyond any cultural or racial controversy" (Morejón 1993:232 [1982]). The revolutionary government undertook development projects and expansion of social services. After the Revolution, Haitians resident in Cuba were given citizenship and they and their families benefited from the new initiatives.

The government also sought to integrate previously disenfranchised sectors of society through the arts. Havana had an internationally recognized ballet. Now, the socialist "new society" would also have a folkloric troupe of highest quality. Ethnomusicologist Katherine Hagedorn describes how the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional was founded in 1962 to represent the nation's Afro-Cuban heritage, turning the performance traditions of marginalized communities to national symbols (2001). From the beginning, the company performed not only secular dances such as Cuban Rumba, but also choreographies drawing from Afro-Cuban religious rituals. Afro-Cuban spiritual practices, removed from their religious context, cleansed of superstition and

antique belief, were performed to demonstrate the racial integration of the secular nation.

Rogelio Martínez Furé, a former student of seminal Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz and one of the founders of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, characterized Cuban folklore as a “powerful weapon in the liberation struggle” noting that folklorists performed useful labor in “recapturing the treasures created by the people” (1993:109 [1979]). He goes on “It is in this field that the revolution is waging one of its major battles, recapturing for the new socialist culture we are building, the valuable, positive traditions created by our people” (1993:111 [1979]). Martínez Furé weighs in on “positive’ versus “negative” folklore, positing that folklore

can be stimulated in its development in an intelligent and scientific way ... eliminating *negative* folklore (superstitions, unsubstantiated taboos, idealistic beliefs in supernatural forces, faith-healing, xenophobia, etc) while enriching *positive* folklore (all that which helps the harmonious development of society, that helps strengthen solidarity among people, that exalts traditions of struggle against oppression, as well as ludic folklore, beneficial folk medicine, and all the flourishing art forms of popular religious beliefs whose cultural value transcends their idealist content and can be imbued with a new, revolutionary social function – music, dance, visual art, oral tradition, etc) (1993:112 [1979] italics and parens in original).

Revolutionary government ideology upheld the falsehood of religion.<sup>55</sup> Slogans on walls and billboards in schools, workplaces, parks, and streets exhorted citizens to work hard, sacrifice for the collective, and practice self-discipline. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld coined the term “cultural intimacy” to describe the tension between how a nation endeavors to present itself (especially to outsiders) and what locals privately feel is the genuine character of their country. The “intimate” or “off-stage” aspects of cultural identity which do not measure up to publicly proclaimed national ideals may even be a source of satisfaction, pride, or perhaps rueful appreciation (Herzfeld 2005). Stereotypes of Cuban nature as pleasure-seeking, gallant, suave,

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<sup>55</sup> The repression of Afro-Cuban spiritual practices in the name of “progress” has a history that long predates the socialist regime. For more on race and notions of modernity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Helg (1995), Ferrer (1999), de la Fuente (2001), Palmié (2002), Ayorinde (2004).

and anti-authoritarian vie with being a virtuous communist as a base of national identity. Herzfeld observes that in order to manage the fidelity of its citizens, state power “may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation,” in a negotiation between upholding authorized doctrines yet promoting local strengths that are officially weaknesses or failures (2005:3). While formal policy held that Afro-Cuban religions were anti-modern superstition, sacred music, dance, and arts exemplified qualities deemed valuable facets of the Cuban spirit, such as sensuality, flamboyance, and rhythmic control. Folklore was a fertile area to perform a national body now freed from class and race hierarchies. By staging black spiritual practices in an acceptably secular format, the new socialist regime could affirm and valorize Cuba’s creole racial mix while remaining ostensibly irreligious.

While Fernando Ortiz, the “father of Cuban ethnography,” organized performances of Havana-based Santería and Abakuá ritual drumming to accompany his public lectures as early as the 1930s, only after the socialist revolution was folkloric performance funded and professionalized on a widespread basis. During the early 1960s, the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional became a national symbol, and soon thereafter regional counterparts were founded, or existing groups, like Folclórico de Oriente in Santiago, were reorganized and reinvigorated across the island. These folkloric ensembles often recruited members among knowledgeable percussionists and dancers from Afro-Cuban recreational societies or religious communities. Armed with training in modern dance, theater, and performance technique, graduates of new art academies such as Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) in Havana were sent to develop cultural activities throughout Cuba. Many were assigned as producers, directors, and choreographers for new folkloric companies.

A prominent “economy of the arts” grew under the new regime in Cuba. Government-funded cultural centers providing programming, events, and youth activities, were constructed even in tiny villages. The socialist state sought to showcase the unity of its multi-racial society through vigorous promotion and funding for sports, the arts, and *grupos folklóricos*—typically staged manifestations of Afro-Cuban cultural activities. Flourishing cultural and artistic expression confirmed that the socialist regime could create a better society. Race and class inequalities were being overcome; arts were no longer the domain of the bourgeoisie. In Cuba, even peasants, tobacco factory workers, or bricklayers would be participants in civic life. And the role of the island’s African-descended population in the formation of national identity was publicly performed in the arena of “folklore.” Rather than being an uncertain or precarious occupation, performing arts became a secure profession, as professional musicians, dancers, and choreographers became salaried employees of the state. Eventually, a Ministry of Culture, a union of writers and artists (UNEAC), and a range of municipal bureaucracies and arts cooperatives were formed to certify the various ranks of professional performers and also to oversee and distribute resources to *aficionado* (“enthusiast”) groups, including *portadores* (“heritage performers”).

At the time of the socialist revolution, the music and dance of Haitian heritage settlements were largely unknown to urban Cuban audiences and were not recognized as valid ingredients in Cuba’s “ethnic stew” of artistic traditions on a national level.<sup>56</sup> However, a few researchers, event producers, and other culture brokers began to notice these art forms and appreciate their potential.

One of a cadre of influential post-revolutionary cultural producers in Santiago province is

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<sup>56</sup> The seminal Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz characterized Cuban culture an *ajiaco*, a stew made from various ingredients with each item contributing to the flavorful whole (1940).

Antonio “Toni” Pérez Martínez, who directed the Folclórico de Oriente from 1972 to 1991, and is currently the Artistic Director of the Casa del Caribe. Toni Pérez graduated from the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) in 1971 and was assigned to Santiago province to help Folclórico de Oriente expand and professionalize. He realized the troupe had a limited repertoire and decided to focus on developing new choreographies that would distinguish it from Havana’s Conjunto Folklórico Nacional.

Town and city dwellers in Cuba sometimes trekked to rural areas for seasonal work during the sugar cane or coffee harvests. Many of the dancers from the Folclórico de Oriente were from poor families and had grown up working as seasonal cane cutters or coffee pickers in Haitian communities and were therefore familiar with Haitian language, music, and festivals. Toni Pérez remarks that they were thus able to “enter that world, which was a closed world. At that time, the Haitians manifested their traditions only inside their own communities ... I’m talking about the 50’s and 60’s, before Haitians [in Cuba] were doctors or engineers ... things have changed since then.”<sup>57</sup>

Pérez believed that Folclórico de Oriente should shed the mindset that Cuban folklore consisted of Rumba and dances based on Santería religious rituals, traditions originally from western Cuba. He recounts how the group pushed into new territory, establishing a vision of regional identity that included Haitian traditions.<sup>58</sup>

It was September of 1972 and I had been in Santiago for only a month when Folclórico de Oriente was invited to perform in Havana in December. The group had practically no repertoire and it was already September. So I said: ‘Well, what will we do? We have a two-hour show to do at the Mella Theater in Havana, and we have no repertoire.’ We had a few tidbits of Rumba, some vignettes based on Santiago carnival, and that was that. One of the members of the group says,

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<sup>57</sup> My translation from an interview conducted on December 15, 2008, in Santiago de Cuba.

<sup>58</sup> My translation from interviews on December 15, 2008, and April 29, 2009, in Santiago de Cuba.

‘When my family used to go to Barrancas to pick coffee, we watched the Haitian dances in the evenings.’ The guys began to sing and move and say ‘I think the step goes like this ...’ and I realized that between all of them they had clear memories of what they had seen and that we could create a show from their notions of what the dance looked like. I also remember there was one person who said, ‘Yeah, but this is a Haitian thing, can we arrive in Havana with this? It’s Haitian culture and has nothing to do with us.’ And I said, ‘What is our culture? That is, who are we?’ Well, we presented ourselves in Havana with Gagá, a Haitian dance, and Chancletas, a local country dance.<sup>59</sup> Tremendous success in Havana. That was in December of 1972 at the Teatro Mella, tremendous success. Because the public was seeing something different. The Havana public was eager to see new things. Gagá made an impact. The national press supported the show. When we returned home after 15 days in Havana, we began to take a good look at ourselves, our local traditions. We realized that we have tremendous vitality in Oriente. We have a vast field in which to research and work, and so far the group has continued in this direction.

Pérez formed teams to research “authentic local folklore.” The village of Barrancas mentioned in the vignette above is a *batey* of sugar cane cutters near the town of Palma Soriano in Santiago province. Locally known for its striking processions, the *Gagá* band from Barrancas had been invited to parade in the carnivals of nearby towns for years.<sup>60</sup> Guided by Folclórico de Oriente member Berta Armiñan, who had grown up accompanying her family to work the sugar cane harvests in Barrancas, Pérez and his team spent a month in the village, living in tents, learning musical and dance traditions. He reminisces, “We realized that here was a marvelous world for us to discover, from the standpoint of the spiritual and cultural wealth they possessed.

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<sup>59</sup> Spelled *Rara* in Haitian Creole, the dance glossed as *Gagá* in Spanish is traditionally performed during Holy Week in Haitian heritage communities in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Much like their counterparts in Haiti, *Gagá* bands in Cuba form processions and march around showing off skills such as fast footwork, fire-eating, juggling machetes, walking across broken glass, or lifting and balancing heavy objects in the air using only the teeth, including tables decked with glasses of liquid. While *Gagá* is overtly a festive secular *comparsa* or procession dance, it is also observably linked with spiritual practices. *Gagá* celebrations culminate with a bonfire setting ablaze a straw-stuffed burlap “devil,” accompanied by elders’ libations and prayers, to drive bad omens from the community. For more on *Gagá*, see Grete Viddal, “Haitian Migration and Danced Identity in Eastern Cuba” (2010). For an excellent monograph on *Rara*, see *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (2002) by Elizabeth McAlister. The second dance Pérez mentions, *chancletas*, is a dance of Iberian origin featuring wooden sandals that clack against the floor.

<sup>60</sup> Cuban municipalities generally organize their carnivals to coincide with traditional feast days pertaining to the historical patron saint of the town.

We had an obligation to begin to cherish these traditions and see them as our part of our regional heritage, to be able to bring them to the stage.”<sup>61</sup> Pérez recounts that he invited people from Barrancas (and eventually other communities as well) to the city, sometimes in groups of three, four, or five, to give classes and teach. They lived in the homes of members of Folclórico Oriente for a fortnight or a month. The Haitian communities began to notify Pérez and his team when feasts, festivals, or religious rituals occurred, inviting them to attend. After adapting the *Gagá* processions of Holy Week for Folclórico de Oriente, Pérez added Haitian merengue. His teams also researched other regional specialties such as *tajona* from the area of Mayari and Songo La Maya, various country dances such as *chancletas*, carnival traditions, a Jamaican maypole dance, and couple dances such as *son* and *chachachá*. Pérez was impressed by performances at the Tumba Francesa society in Santiago and approached the society for their help in adapting some of their dances for Folclórico Oriente. He also eventually created choreographies based on dances, movements, gestures, and salutations he witnessed during Vodú rituals, but this came later.

Pérez was influenced by the work of a famous Soviet choreographer, Igor Moiseyev, whose expert, exciting, highly theatrical choreography based on folk dance had an impact on folkloric troupes around the world. The Moiseyev school focused on bringing the technical preparation of the classical dancer to popular folk performing arts. It took elements of village arts and adapted them for the stage, with drama, technique, and contemporary design.<sup>62</sup> Discussing the process of modifying festive traditions and spiritual practices into folkloric performance for

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<sup>61</sup> Interview December 15, 2008, my translation.

<sup>62</sup> Pérez was later able to travel to the Soviet Union to apprentice in Moiseyev’s company and to complete a Masters degree, returning to Santiago afterwards to continue working with Folclórico de Oriente. For more on Moiseyev’s legacy, see Anthony Shay, *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Ensembles, Representation and Power* (2002).



the stage, Pérez remarks, “They did it [*Gagá*] in their manner, it was a bit diabolical, we’ll put it that way. What I mean is, it was suffused with their witchery and conjuring. These were isolated communities, even looked down upon by the same Cubans, the same black Cubans, who lived in their areas. At the time there was no vision, no visual blueprint, for how to stage these traditions as art, as a national art.” He continued, “Well, the goal was to bring this to the stage as a technically sophisticated professional piece, not to repeat exactly what they were doing in the village, but bring it as a performance.”<sup>63</sup> It is worth noting that *Gagá* band members from Barrancas had themselves already modified their Holy Week *Gagá* processions into formats appropriate for carnival parades in nearby towns.<sup>64</sup> Also, by the 1970s, even people living in rural areas would have had exposure to state-sponsored cultural projects that adapted local customs into folklore shows. We should not assume that during early collaboration between Folclórico de Oriente and *Gagá* de Barrancas, the professionals of Folclórico de Oriente were the only active partners in adapting local traditions for the stage.

Toni Pérez commented on changes he perceived in the Haitian communities after the socialist revolution and how these trends supported the formation of performance groups: “The Revolution changed a lot of things. The children of these Haitian workers in the *bateyes* began to get scholarships. They attended trade schools, universities ... there they mixed with the sons and daughters of industrial workers or of Cuban peasants or whomever. They begin to share their dances, songs, and customs in *aficionado* [hobby] clubs. On holidays they went back to their communities, so they did not lose their language, did not lose their customs ... And those same

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<sup>63</sup> Interview April 29, 2009, my translation.

<sup>64</sup> From a conversation with Alfonso Castillo Pol, a leader of the *Gagá* of Barrancas, January 14, 2011.

students, *pichones*,<sup>65</sup> as we called them, also began to communicate and network amongst themselves.”<sup>66</sup>

Folclórico Oriente split into two in 1976, forming a second professional folkloric troupe: Cutumba. Former Cutumba musical director Felix Navarro Navarro also told me stories of the adventures of Cutumba’s artistic and musical directors as they went into the countryside to research rhythms and dances. Navarro describes loading down a jeep with cases of rum, tents, and a reel-to-reel recording device, and partying in the Haitian communities for days or weeks, drinking rum and learning to play Haitian drums.<sup>67</sup>

While professional folklore troupes began to incorporate Haitian material into their repertoire in the 1970s, families and communities of Haitian heritage also began working with culture officials to form state-supported performance groups. These are categorized as *portador* groups—heritage performers or cultural stewards. Maria del Rosario Quintana Matos, employed during the 1970s as a dance instructor at the local *Casa de Cultura*, explained that at the time there were no folkloric groups in the area of Las Tunas. She approached members of “Bella Flor de Fleitas,” a *Gagá* band that paraded in local *bateyes* during Holy Week, about creating an artistic performance group.<sup>68</sup> In 1976 a company was formed under the auspices of the municipal culture office, directed by Silvia “Titina” Hilmo Sandy, a ritual specialist and the matriarch of a large family, many of whom were active in the group. They named the company Petit Dancé. At

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<sup>65</sup> *Pichón* means chick or baby bird in Spanish. Although it can be used to refer to Cubans of any heritage, it has been more typically used to designate Cubans of Haitian, Jamaican, or other West Indian heritage. While many consider it derogatory, others insist that it is merely slang. I found it common for people within the Haitian heritage community to use it offhandedly. See Carlos Moore (2008) and Yanique Hume (2011) for a discussion of the term’s pejorative connotations.

<sup>66</sup> Interview December 15, 2008, in Santiago de Cuba, my translation.

<sup>67</sup> Interview June 5, 2011, in Oslo, Norway.

<sup>68</sup> Interview February 24, 2010, in Las Tunas.

first they danced “libre” or freely, as they would at home in the village; later there was rehearsed choreography. Del Rosario Quintana noted that at first the project was not well accepted. The public in Las Tunas was not used to seeing performances that included lying down on broken glass or throwing machetes; it seemed too “barbaric.” However, they eventually became enthusiastic. Titina’s grandson Carlos explained that at first the group presented ostensibly secular dances like Haitian Merengue, country Polkas or Minuets, and *Gagá*. Later, Titina began to adapt dances from sacred occasions to the stage. Performer José Gabriel “Graviel” Spret, a seasoned drummer and dancer, was recruited to become a consultant and instructor for Folclórico Oriente in Santiago. Carlos notes that Graviel eventually became one of the “great voices” disseminating Haitian culture in Cuba. Gradually, *haitiano-cubanos* marshaled folklore as their own resource (not waiting to be “discovered” by professional programmers or ethnographers). Today, remarked Carlos, troupes presenting Haitian traditions are on the increase, there is even an ensemble performing Haitian-based choreographies at a beach hotel in the resort town of Guardalavaca in nearby Holguín province.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Interview February 24, 2010, in Las Tunas.e

The Casa del Caribe and the Haitian Presence in *Oriente*



Figure 9 – The Casa del Caribe cultural research institution in Santiago de Cuba



Figure 10 – James on the cover of Del Caribe (Issue 48/49 2007)

Actor, dramaturge, and historian Joel James

Figarola was active in post-revolutionary Cuba's new cultural movements and eventually founded the Casa del Caribe in the city of Santiago de Cuba in 1982, an institute devoted to researching and presenting local culture. He remained its director until his death in June 2006. While a number of institutions devoted to the study of Cuban history and cultural identity were

founded after the Revolution, the Casa del Caribe has been distinctive in its promotion of Cuba's bond with the Caribbean, its interest in migrant communities in *oriente*, and its role as a producer and promoter of performance arts, sometimes through unorthodox means. Interestingly, it is an institution created with a twofold mission to unite performance with research and theory. That is,

the Casa del Caribe produces festivals and events that draw on research conducted by the institution and vice versa. This emphasis on performance shaped the spread of non-institutional religions, including Vodú, into the Cuban public space.

Before the founding of Casa del Caribe, James directed the Department of Dramaturgy and Programming of the Cabildo Teatral in Santiago.<sup>70</sup> During this time, in the late 1970s, a number of people involved in experimental theater in Santiago were eager to include local tradition in their artistic productions. They wanted to create a form of theater compatible with socialist ideals and congruent with Cuba as an “Afro-Latin”<sup>71</sup> nation. Avoiding presenting conventional European masterpieces or repeating North American trends, they looked instead to popular culture for inspiration and material (Alarcón 2007). According to Cuban dramaturge and theater critic Omar Valiño, the Cabildo Teatral Santiago was a pioneer in the *teatro de relaciones* movement in Cuba, an evolving style of theater that focuses on “transforming the scaffolding” and deconstructing the “elitist logics of traditional theater” (Valiño n.d.). It was an outgrowth of the “New Theater” movements popular in Latin America in the 1960s.<sup>72</sup> Joel James was one of the theorists and exponents of *teatro de relaciones*.

In order to incorporate the culture of sectors of the city that generally did not go to the theater, he asked his actors and collaborators to spend time in the poorer barrios of Santiago, such as Tivoli, Los Hoyos, and San Pedrito, which all had carnival clubs, active house temples of

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<sup>70</sup> The name “Cabildo Teatral Santiago” for the collective connotes a brother/sisterhood of theater people, or guild. Historically, *cabildos* were mutual-aid and recreation associations formed by enslaved Africans in colonial Cuba, based on *cofradías*, the brotherhoods or guilds of medieval Spain. Later, the word became attached to a variety of organizations based around a common vision of ethnic pride or fraternity.

<sup>71</sup> Fidel Castro first referred to Cuba as an “Afro-Latin” nation during Cuba’s involvement in Africa, specifically during a speech about Angola in April 1976 (See Moore 1988, Ayorinde 2004).

<sup>72</sup> “New Theater” in turn was rooted in the work of alternative theater pioneers such as Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, and Jerzy Grotowsky (Alarcón, personal conversation, January 14, 2011).

Afro-Cuban religion, vigorous Saints Day celebrations, and well-known percussionists. By performing in non-traditional venues such as the street and in parades and popular festivals, they tried to interrupt normal barriers between actors and public. Former actor Alexis Alarcón mused: “Cabildo Teatral Santiago was a theater group dedicated to *teatro de relaciones* which were little pieces of theater they did in the street, and they also marched with the *comparsas* and *congas* and *paseos* [carnival groups] mixing in elements of magic and religion that were part of popular culture.”<sup>73</sup>

Joel James and members of his theater group were invited to Carifesta, which was held in Havana in 1979.<sup>74</sup> For the first time, they saw a variety of performance troupes from other Caribbean nations. They set out to organize a similar event in Santiago. At the time, in the late 1970s, the Cuban political climate was saturated with declarations of international socialist cooperation and belief in the inevitability of global socialism. However, Cuba, a land of sandy beaches and hot music, was perceived as a marginal presence in the Soviet bloc. James credits Armando Hart, the influential Minister of Culture during the 1970s and 1980s, with being a key voice upholding the Caribbean as an important nexus of relationships for Cuba and a natural zone of cultural allegiance (James 1996 [2007]). James argues that Cuba’s bond with the Caribbean declined during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the United States became increasingly dominant in the Cuban economy. While Santiago de Cuba had always been linked to the Antilles, the port of Havana was linked to Latin America, and, during the 1940s, increasingly to New York and Miami via trade, diplomacy, and economic and cultural orientation (1996 [2007]). By the 1950s, Havana was filled with US products and brands, technologies, entertainment, business ventures,

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<sup>73</sup> Interview December 5, 2008, in Santiago de Cuba, my translation.

<sup>74</sup> A festival organized under the auspices of CARICOM that gathers artists, musicians, and writers to promote the arts and folklore of the Caribbean. See [www.carifesta.net](http://www.carifesta.net) for more details.

and tourists. But after Fidel Castro's revolutionary triumph in 1959, Cuba became isolated from surrounding capitalist states. During the 1970s, Minister of Culture Armando Hart was one of the first prominent citizens to urge reconnection with the Caribbean, not just in terms of political links, but also in terms of identity. After attending Carifesta in 1979, Joel James realized that his aspiration to promote socially relevant performance and his commitment to *teatro de relaciones* fit perfectly within the realm of Caribbean performance arts.

During the mid-seventies, James had visited the village of Barrancas to see the *Gagá* processions during Holy Week and noticed that the tradition included theater and social commentary. Comedic skits were performed while dancing *Gagá*, such as satires about the police or the rural guard trying to capture a Haitian, who, playing the clown, fooled them, and escaped. The pieces of theater performed by the Haitian descendants related to concepts inherent in *teatro de relaciones* because they explored social relations, made satirical commentary, and involved the audience during performances. He explained, "When they danced the *gagá*, inside the *gagá*, was a theater of relations. The people from Barrancas called it *comedia*" (1996 [2007:111-112] my translation). For James, the elements of theater already present in local communities indicated the viability of organizing a festival of Caribbean performance arts. From the beginning, including marginalized sectors of Cuban society such as the Haitian laborers and their descendants were part of the objective. James organized Santiago's first "Festival de las Artes Escénicas de Origen Caribeño" (Festival of Caribbean Performance Arts) in 1981. Later known as the Festival del Caribe and Festival del Fuego, the event has taken place every year since.

Alexis Alarcón, one of the co-authors of *el Vodú en Cuba* (James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007) recounted this story, which takes place during the early days of the Casa del Caribe project and illustrates the budding recognition of Haitian religion.<sup>75</sup>

Joel wanted to observe rural traditions and I had family in the coffee growing region around the village of La Caridad in the Sierra Maestra mountains, so I invited him to spend a weekend in the countryside where I grew up. A former batey—a cluster of thatch-roofed houses belonging to a group of Haitian-descendants—was located right next to my father’s farm. In previous decades, the Haitians had been laborers on local coffee plantations. After the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, the residents of the batey worked for the agricultural cooperatives that replaced large-scale land ownership, and also tended small private gardens. I had grown up next to the Haitian community. Their drumming and rituals were ever-present. We were invited to one of their events and spent the night watching drumming, dancing, singing, and possession trances. Many Cubans, whether of African or Spanish descent, included revelry and music in their religious practices, including folk Catholics, Spiritists, and adherents of Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería. I didn’t see my father’s neighbors as something unique. But when we were walking back to my father’s house, Joel said to me, ‘Alarcón, this is a goldmine!’ I responded, ‘What goldmine?’ He replied: ‘This! We have to document this!’ Really, I was unsure what he was referring to. Joel explained that what we were seeing was Vodú, the Haitian religion we had read about in books by Courlander and Metraux. Joel had a consciousness of the importance of these cultural expressions, and believed that strengthening local culture was a way of strengthening national culture. During our next visit, he asked some of the members of the community to bring their instruments over, and the sons of Haitian-born Nicolás Casal, played drums at my father’s house. He talked about the possibility of organizing a group of Haitian descendants from La Caridad into a performance group and inviting them to events in the city.<sup>76</sup>

Joel James and his team are often credited with “discovering” the magnitude of Haitian cultural influence in Santiago province. Until the inquiries promoted by the Casa del Caribe, Cuban ethnographers interested in the island’s black heritage had largely focused on the provenance of cultural elements brought by African slaves. Ethnographers and historians had

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<sup>75</sup> The account I offer here is a translation compiled from interviews on April 30, 2009, and April 28, 2010. Alarcón also tells this story in a published interview “Joel James y el camino de los luases” (2007).

<sup>76</sup> The group from La Caridad made its debut at the 1983 Festival del Caribe and continues to participate.



theorized that the origins of the religion called Santería lie in what is now Yorubaland in Nigeria, speculated about surviving “Congo” cultural practices from Central Africa and located the ancestral home of the Cuban Abakuá secret societies in the Cross River region of what is now Calabar province in Nigeria. Studies of the influence of various regions of Spain on Cuban customs and idioms were also abundant.<sup>77</sup> Few researchers, however, had been interested in the contributions of hundreds of thousands of Haitian laborers who arrived in eastern Cuba in the early twentieth century. While James was not the only intellectual to investigate Cuba’s Haitian heritage, he was a key figure. He publicly promoted and valorized this ingredient in Cuba’s “ethnic stew.”

#### Actors Become Anthropologists

The Casa del Caribe was founded in 1982. Notably, it is an institution dedicated to event production and cultural performance as well as research and publishing. Investigative teams were organized for different themes such as coffee plantation culture, popular festivals and saint’s day celebrations, Afro-Cuban religion, migratory processes, local history, slave rebellions, and carnival clubs. James taught his cohort of actors, dramaturges, and theater producers to become grassroots anthropologists, known for their immersive style of fieldwork. Rarely did they conduct formal interviews or take notes visibly. Instead, researchers were encouraged to submerge themselves in the everyday lives of the communities they were studying. He mused: “We tried to live as they lived, drink what they drank, eat what they ate” (1996 [2007]:109).

Founding Casa del Caribe researcher Alexi Alarcón recounts:

Joel understood that we needed to conduct ethnographies and gave me the assignment of researching Vodú because of my relationship with the community. Important priests and priestesses like Nicolás Casal and Elena Celestien Vidal had

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<sup>77</sup> See Ortiz (1929, 1950), Lachatañere ([1939] 1961), Cabrera ([1954] 1992).

known me since I was a child; some lived just a few meters from my father's house in La Caridad. I did not have any special preparation to do this research; I was an actor and play producer. Around November of 1982, the Casal family called Joel on the telephone and told him there was going to be a Vodú ceremony at the home of Nicolás. Joel couldn't participate because he was so busy with his administrative duties. I was told to go, along with another researcher, Julio Corbea.<sup>78</sup> We met for the first time at the bus station. We didn't bring a recording device or a camera or anything like that. We just had some notebooks and pencils. Julio had also never seen a Vodú ceremony. When we got to the last village on the bus line, we climbed further on foot, high into the Sierra Maestras, and spent five days there. When we returned, Joel asked us to present our research at the Casa del Caribe. This was the first time that we did a public presentation about Vodú. Afterwards, Joel decided that Julio and I would continue to investigate Vodú and he added another person to our team, José Millet.<sup>79</sup> Vodú practitioners typically held ceremonies every two or three years as finances permitted, because events required resources in terms of food for the altars, animals to feed the spirits, etc. Our team went up the mountain again in December 1983 to see a ceremony called the mesa blanca.<sup>80</sup> We spread out to best see what was happening. One of us spent the entire ceremony on his knees right next to Nicolás, so we could understand what the priest's hands were doing. We wanted more information on Vodú, but there were few resources. Joel gave us Alfred Métraux's book and Harold Courlander's book,<sup>81</sup> and *Ainsi parla l'oncle* by Jean Price Mars. We also had a book about Haitian culture in the Dominican Republic by Carlos Esteban Deive and Janheinz Jahn's book about African philosophy, *Muntu*, which was already in Spanish. And we had the articles by Alberto Pedro about Haitians in Camagüey. That's how we learned to become ethnographers, I was taught by Joel and we essentially learned by doing.<sup>82</sup>

Eventually, the team attended hundreds of rituals in different parts of eastern Cuba (Alarcón 2007). Notably, folklore has functioned as a vector of social change. Contact with ethnographers and opportunities for public performance have created new contexts for Vodú.

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<sup>78</sup> Corbea is now the editor of *Del Caribe*, a journal published by Casa del Caribe, and the "historiador del pueblo" or official town historian for the village of el Cobre, near Santiago.

<sup>79</sup> José Millet eventually became a co-author of the book *el Vodú en Cuba*.

<sup>80</sup> This term is typically used by Cuban Spiritists to refer to rituals featuring a table (*mesa*) covered by a white (*blanca*) tablecloth. Whether in this case the community also used a Haitian Creole language term for their ritual is unclear.

<sup>81</sup> Team member José Millet made rough Spanish translations of *Voodoo in Haiti* by Métraux and *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People* by Courlander.

<sup>82</sup> The account I offer here is a translation compiled from interviews on April 30, 2009, and April 28, 2010. Alarcón also tells this story in: "Joel James y el camino de los luases" (2007).

## Magical Performance in an Atheist Landscape

The activities of the newly formed Casa del Caribe, with its intrepid and largely self-taught research teams, were not without controversy in the early years. The Revolution was officially atheist and did not support religious expression. Authorities tried to minimize mass gatherings outside of officially recognized events. While many Cubans continued various spiritual practices and retained a sense that the aid of the spirit world was important to health, prosperity, luck, and happiness, the regime believed that socialist education would gradually fade beliefs in magic and religion into acceptable folkloric renderings of former spiritual fervor. As the Casa del Caribe endeavored to present and showcase Caribbean performance arts, producers asked local practitioners to stage their spiritual traditions for the public, with the understanding that they would omit ritual secrets or knowledge meant only for the initiated.

Frist putting Vodú on the stage in 1983 caused a stir. Founding Casa del Caribe researcher Abelardo Larduet remembers, “The Party made a fuss. The Ministry of Culture was less problematic; at least intellectuals ran it. But people from State Security came to the first Vodú ceremony and discussed stopping it. Joel had to fight some battles.”<sup>83</sup> In a socialist environment, the Casa del Caribe was promoting what some considered witchcraft and superstition, low-class religion, and the raucous entertainments of the poor as strategies to strengthen society! The state wanted sanitized folklore, images of dusty but happy peasants or gritty but virtuous urban workers performing their traditional work songs and dances. Vodú was raw, it was too overtly religious, it was too African. Alexis Alarcón confirms, “There was tension with the authorities, who had a hard time understanding Joel’s ideas. But he was irascible and told the government and the Party to let him work.” Joel, explained Alarcón, felt that poor and marginal people did not have to give up their culture of religious practices in the face of

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<sup>83</sup> Interview, February 14, 2009, in Santiago de Cuba, my translation.

Marxist dogma. The popular classes could call their spirits, drum until the gods visited the earth, become possessed, dance with their deities at parties held in their honor, and still be to be good revolutionaries, good citizens, and good socialists. James asked the authorities if they wanted “the drums drumming in favor of the Revolution or against it.”<sup>84</sup>

James’ commitment to not only including the Haitian heritage groups but making them a central element of each festival bewildered many. He recounts, “There came a time when it seemed like the idea of the festival would shipwreck. People asked things like, ‘what the devil are you doing with these Haitian things?’ But, they helped us anyway.” During the early years many local intellectuals were appalled by what the Casa del Caribe presented. However, they were also bowled over by the emotional impact of the performances and events. James recounts, “They were surprised that these things, which they had considered marginal, of the uneducated, were so rich, and could stir them” (1996 [2007:109] my translation). Larduet remembers, “The Casa del Caribe brought the Haitian groups to Festival del Caribe, and people were surprised to see how prevalent and strong these communities were. Cubans had thought of themselves as Latin American, but our Haitian heritage communities reflected Cuba’s Caribbean-ness.”<sup>85</sup>

Even after the festival achieved prominence in the ensuing years, the road was sometimes rocky. When Casa del Caribe partnered in creating a documentary profiling a Haitian community in the municipality of Palma Soriano in Santiago province, the Communist Party of Palma Soriano protested Casa del Caribe’s efforts. Although the documentary, *Huellas*,<sup>86</sup> later won first prize at a film festival in Moscow, in Cuba local prejudices had yet to be overcome (James 1996

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<sup>84</sup> Interview, April 28, 2010, in Santiago de Cuba, my translation. The anecdote also appears in “Joel James y el camino de los luases” (Alarcón 2007).

<sup>85</sup> Interview, February 14, 2009, in Santiago de Cuba, my translation.

<sup>86</sup> The film, released in 1986, was directed by Roberto Román González and produced by Estudios Cinematográficos de la TV Cubana, with Casa del Caribe consulting. *Huellas* means “footprints” or “traces.”

[2007]).

The Casa del Caribe continued its mission to dignify popular culture in front of the Cuban public, and James recognized additional benefits, “ I believe we have also increased the self-esteem of the participating groups” (1996 [2007:113] my translation). Two of the Vodú priests who collaborated in the filming of *Huellas*, the brothers Pablo and Tato Milanés,<sup>87</sup> have since become sought after spokespersons on Vodú. James suggested, “Pablo is not the same person, Tato is not the same person ... in terms of their relationship with their own spiritual system and their relationships with the lay public” (1996 [2007:113] my translation). The valorization of the Caribbean via performance arts broadened acceptance of religious culture in communist Cuba, since much of what was presented had magical, spiritual, philosophical, or religious facets. Acceptance on stage has allowed for a certain tolerance of practice. The Milanés brothers have since traveled throughout Cuba and been invited abroad as members of Cuban delegations to folk festivals in Haiti, Brazil, and Curaçao. In November 2008, Pablo Milanés was invited to offer a Vodú invocation at the “Cuba em Pernambuco” festival in Brazil. Mounted by a spirit, he fell to the floor and ran sharp machetes across his body without injury: a cultural ambassador from a socialist realm offering a magical spectacle of trance possession.

During the ensuing years, the Casa del Caribe’s festival changed in a number of ways. The name “Festival del Caribe” was similar to the names of festivals in other countries and therefore difficult to brand and market. A catchy second name was added, the “Festival del Fuego” or “Festival of Fire,” evoking, according to James, the fire necessary to tighten a leather drumhead, the bright Cuban sun, and the “forge of struggle” for international Marxism (1996 [2007]). Other changes included making connections outside Cuba and breaking ground with

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<sup>87</sup> Not to be confused with the Latin Grammy winning Cuban singer-songwriter also named Pablo Milanés, the Vodú ritual specialist’s full name is Pablo Milanés Fuentes.

innovative responses to fiscal challenges. Some of these approaches put the center at odds with state bureaucracy; others had an impact on the institution's mission to valorize local popular culture in unexpected ways.

During the early years, the Festival del Caribe was produced on a shoestring. James remembers that the biggest issue was simply hosting the local groups; they needed breakfast, lunch, dinner, and transportation to and from their events. The Casa del Caribe did not have the resources to include participants from outside Cuba. But the festival received support from various Caribbean intellectuals, from the director of UNESCO in Havana, and from Armando Hart, Cuba's Minister of Culture (Larduet 2009). It was determined that the Ministry of Culture and ICAP<sup>88</sup> could see to international aspects while the Casa del Caribe would organize the festival on the local level. But the plucky institution soon began to accumulate its own international connections. When Maurice Bishop<sup>89</sup> was killed in Grenada, the Casa del Caribe decided to organize a memorial, seeing an opportunity to display socialist solidarity and reproach perceived imperialist strategies enacted by the United States. They asked the well-known Santiago-based sculptor Alberto Lescay to mold a bust of Bishop and installed it in the garden of the Casa del Caribe. The local Secretary of the Party attended, and it was resolved to dedicate the 1984 Festival del Caribe to Grenada. Later, Lescay attended an arts event in Guyana, made connections, and Guyana became the featured nation of the 1987 Festival. The Casa del Caribe

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<sup>88</sup> The Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos, or "Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples" an institute coordinating the visits of solidarity brigades, humanitarian aid groups, delegations and international exchange partners with Cuba.

<sup>89</sup> Maurice Bishop became the Prime Minister of the island nation of Grenada after deposing his predecessor Eric Gairy in 1979. Bishop, an avowed Marxist, cultivated ties with Cuba, welcoming Cuban consultants, engineers, and financial support for the expansion of Grenada's airport. In 1983, US President Ronald Reagan sponsored a US-led military invasion of Grenada, citing among other issues the airstrip's capacity to host Soviet military aircraft. (For more see Stephen Zunes October 2003 essay, "The US Invasion of Grenada," in Global Policy Forum, available online at [gpf@globalpolicy.org](mailto:gpf@globalpolicy.org))

advanced itself as an international center for the study of ethnic and cultural identity in all its “polychromatic, sonorous, indomitable, and homegrown” profusion.<sup>90</sup> It began to initiate overseas projects, organizing a trip to Guyana for the Conga of Los Hoyos, Santiago’s oldest carnival parade troupe. James reminisced:

I had to fight and break many tethers. There was a lot of prejudice at the time. A conga was going to leave the country? ... We were at the end of the 1980s, a time when traveling outside of Cuba was very controlled. Those who traveled were like flags representing the homeland. Imagine the response when we wanted to take a conga —drummers, poor people, doing their rowdy dances— as a representation of the country. But in the end we convinced them. (1996 [2007:116] my translation)

Other groups have traveled since. Furthermore, each year the Festival del Caribe has been dedicated to a country, cultural group, or movement. Those spotlighted have included Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, the francophone Caribbean, Africa, José Martí and global equality, the Bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution, the Mexican Caribbean, the Garifuna of Honduras, and the Brazilian state of Pernambuco. James posited the Festival as a means of reducing Cuba’s isolation using the power of local tradition. On the ethos of the Festival James explained:

We want to maintain its spontaneous, chaotic elements; we don’t want everything to be pre-established. We incorporate magical and religious cultural components in a public manner. If these organic elements are lost, our society weakens. If our society is integrated, if all elements are valorized, it is more difficult to devour it by whatever type of imperialism ... What we want is an independent, free country, and one way to strengthen this independence is to support all the parts that are integrated into our society. This includes integrating the cultural manifestations brought by minorities such as the Antillean *braceros* and their descendants ... I am not saying that people should initiate into Palo, Santería; no one needs to become a *santero*. It is simply important to be conscious of popular religion. (James 1996 [2007:113-114] my translation and italics)

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<sup>90</sup> My translation from the Casa del Caribe’s website ([www.casadelcaribe.cult.cu](http://www.casadelcaribe.cult.cu)) and the *Magazin Cartalera Turístico y Comercial*, Suplemento Especial: 3-9 Julio 2010, published by Paradiso/Artex, Cuba.

Studies of the customs, spirituality, music, and festivals of Afro-Cubans and various populations of the urban poor, rural *campesinos*, and ethnic minorities had been carried out in Cuba since Fernando Ortiz, the renowned “father of Cuban ethnography” began researching and publishing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After 1959, the new socialist regime sought to integrate disenfranchised sectors of society, display racial harmony, and represent national unity through new funding for folkloric performance. Although a participant in this national project, Joel James’ concept of *how* to include “traditional popular culture” sometimes put him at odds with governing models of acceptable social expression throughout his two and a half decade tenure at the helm of the Casa del Caribe. Furthermore, the organization expanded the government’s projects to include the most recent and most denigrated group within Cuban society: Haitian migrants. The institute pushed boundaries by staging not only orderly re-enactments of rituals presented as dance shows, but sponsoring actual rituals, complete with possession trance, sacral deployment of alcohol, and animal sacrifice, as a part of festival programming. Although governmental bureaucrats and administrators were not always supportive, James and his team insisted that collaborators be able to perform and participate in ways meaningful to them. The institute envisioned itself as something more than a place for intellectuals and scholars, but also as kind of a ‘second home’ for performers and practitioners (Alarcón 2010).<sup>91</sup> Socialist models of folklore were stretched as real rituals were enacted in public spaces. Since alcohol is essential for pouring libations for many deities, and because rituals are festive occasions that often include imbibing spirits in the context of saluting the spirits, the Casa del Caribe’s storage lockers

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<sup>91</sup> James also lived his ideals in the arrangement of systems and spaces in his daily life. He considered desks bourgeois furniture and eschewed having one in his office, feeling that desks created unnecessary distance between himself and his guests, colleagues, or collaborators. Today, the current director of Casa del Caribe, Orlando Vergés, continues James’ “no-desk” policy. Vergés’ office is furnished with chairs arranged in a semi-circle around a low coffee table, which is piled with food and rum whenever possible. Vergés conducts the work of directing eastern Cuba’s largest cultural institute without a desk, wanting to “sit on the same side” as his collaborators and colleagues. Tasks and projects are carried out with rapport, with libations—and no desk.



housed cases of rum allocated for collaborators and its budget included funds to assist with the purchase of livestock and various foods and other items necessary for altars and ritual revelries. This approach garnered the institution both acclamation and disrepute (and still does today). While the Casa del Caribe's grassroots style is appreciated, some consider its reputation for hosting rollicking festivals, complete with divine fetes, to be at odds with its mission as a research entity.

The Casa del Caribe's projects initiated exchanges between different collaborators. Members of folkloric groups got to know each other and spend time together in the context of the Festival. Although there had always been communication and interchange between the various Haitian communities, the Festival was a further opportunity for them to strengthen ties, exchange information, and work together. The Festival has been an important factor in motivating Haitian descendants in *oriente* to maintain their customs. It has further given singers, dancers, musicians, and Vodú priests access to Cuba's "folkloric economy," including opportunities such as recording albums or traveling, or simply gaining personal and spiritual satisfaction through expanding networks for performing and teaching.

### The Changing Economy of the Arts in Cuba

The Festival del Caribe fell into serious financial trouble after the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 and Cuba lost its primary trading partner and source of subsidies. The ensuing economic crisis on the island affected every aspect of daily life. Imports fell between 70 and 80 percent (Pérez 1995, Eckstein 2003, Hernandez-Reguant 2009). Fidel Castro declared the country to be in a situation of war-like siege, a "Special Period in Time of Peace," and put extreme austerity measures into action. Stories of hardship and survival during the time circulate in daily

conversations on the island. I was told of hospitals and schools functioning without running water for days or weeks, blackouts so lengthy that the term *alumbión* or “light up” was invented to describe brief periods of electricity, and cheerful cooking shows explaining how to make fried grapefruit rinds taste like meat. Street pizzas with nearly invisible sauce and “cheese” made from melted condoms (available for free through public health bureaus) were a ubiquitous tragicomic icon featured in many recollections. With the Cuban economy in virtual free-fall, Havana and Santiago carnivals were cancelled, along with most festivals and public diversions.

While Festival del Caribe managed to carry on even during the worst years, organizers recognized that they never wanted to be dependent on government funding again. Although entrepreneurship was a feat in a heavily centralized socialist bureaucracy, staff came up with a plan to make the festival self-financing, a rarity among Cuban institutions.

The Casa del Caribe opened three bars and self-financed through the sale of alcohol.<sup>92</sup> The locales could be rented for weddings or events. Each offered programming, such as weekly rumba shows, competitions for salsa dancers, jam sessions for percussionists, and concerts. The venues attracted foreign tourists and study groups and were even mentioned in guidebooks as hip out-of-the-way places to experience the Santiago music scene. The establishments also sold quality hard-currency rum by the case at slightly lower prices than most state-run shops and became a resource for bulk-buying consumers.

In the 1990s, Cuban society underwent profound changes. Commenting on this period, media scholar Cristina Venegas explains, “The nation began to be constructed as independent from the revolutionary state” (2009:41). Hernandez-Reguant argues that as the government retreated from providing services, there was a resurgence of forms of popular culture that

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<sup>92</sup> The Casa de las Tradiciones venue in the historic Tivoli neighborhood in Santiago, a little cantina at the institute itself, another in the patio garden of its Museum of Popular Religion.

resisted the ossified divisions between “high culture” and “low culture” typical in socialist cultural bureaucracies. She contends, “The Special Period marked a departure from an earlier social pressure to express a uniformity of experience” (2009:3). Spurred by economic necessity, organizations departed from national ideological narratives and searched for local solutions. Hernandez- Reguant calls it a shift “from a revolutionary nationalism based on political community to a national ideology of belonging based on local culture and history” (2009:15).

Early post-revolutionary Cuba was linked to anti-imperialism and to the struggle for international socialism. Following the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1991, the island’s political isolation and economic depression made rallying citizens to Marxist solidarity wear thin. Narratives of national identity began to draw more from Cuban culture than socialist camaraderie. Before the loss of Soviet subsidies, communist Cuba did not yet market itself to first world tourists as an exotic land where visitors could see locals venerate pantheons of colorfully costumed African deities. But despite the severe economic crisis, state funding for music, dance, and arts groups continued, driven in part by efforts to draw tourists to Cuba’s unique cultural offerings (Frederik 2009:99, Hernandez-Reguant 2009:70-71, 75).

As more foreigners entered Cuba in search of salsa lessons and percussion instruction, folkloric groups began to offer a growing number of classes and programs. Dance and drum specialists from even small towns hoped to work for foreign audiences and students. Folklore became an increasingly important currency of survival in post-Soviet Cuba.

Haitian laborers and their descendants were once viewed in Cuba as dispossessed and disadvantaged migrant workers holding firm to old-fashioned traditions carried from their homeland, with conditions of privation and segregation facilitating the preservation of time-honored customs. While preservation of lifeways and customs has been attributed to isolation

and poverty, as we have seen, the academy, political actors, commerce, and tourism can influence the maintenance of traditions. In the decades after the Cuban Revolution, the socialist government opened a vehicle for the re-imagining of spiritual traditions through public performance in the burgeoning arena of folklore. Professional performers such as Toni Pérez and research institutions such as the Casa del Caribe invited members of Haitian communities to share their music, dance, and traditions, and to form folklore troupes. As the Special Period opened venues for contact with the world outside Cuba, culture ministries, academic institutions, festival producers and conference programmers became active culture brokers, distributing resources such as access to audiences and travel opportunities.

The penetration of the folkloric imaginary into Haitian heritage communities in Cuba is deep. Festivals serve as points where *haitiano-cubanos* perform their culture for the general public and as opportunities for people spread across the island to network as they dance together and engage in all-night jam sessions. Efforts by people of Haitian heritage to bring their customs and spiritual practices to new locations, contexts, and audiences continue and multiply.

No longer waiting to be “discovered” by outsiders, *haitiano-cubanos* have found innovative ways to transform the once abject into the now exotic. Having become administrators, academics, professional artists, and culture brokers themselves, many are currently gaining a public voice in cultural production, particularly through folkloric performance. Also, Vodú is spreading across the island and emerging in Havana. Cosmopolitan practitioners of Santería in the capital have begun to study Haitian religion, perhaps as the final frontier of exotica available in a country where travel abroad has been restricted.

Thompson: Reggaeton or Grandpa’s Vodú?

Although I first visited Cuba in 1998, it wasn't until graduate school that I was able to spend extended time on the island. Between 2008 and 2010, I lived in Santiago de Cuba for fifteen months and traveled to towns and villages throughout the eastern provinces to attend events, festivals, and religious ceremonies linked with *haitiano-cubano* communities.<sup>93</sup> Since my previous research indicated that folkloric troupes are a significant vehicle for valorizing *haitiano-cubano* culture, I collaborated with performers specializing in Cuba's Haitian heritage. I also met practitioners of Vodú and attended rituals. Scholars, research institutes, festival organizers, and other culture brokers helped me understand how Cubans of Haitian descent have or have not been formally integrated into the national imaginary, as well as how policy makers have officially studied, ignored, discouraged, or sponsored *haitiano-cubano* cultural practices.

When I visited small towns in Santiago province with concentrations of Haitian descendants, I was surprised to see how many communities had amateur folkloric dance and drum troupes. In the village of Thompson, I counted more members in "Grupo Folklórico Thompson" than children enrolled in its tiny one-room school. Some danced, played, or sang in the troupe. Others contributed by sewing costumes or aiding with logistics. Elders were involved as artistic or musical directors, choreography consultants, teachers or mentors. Many villagers spent their leisure time practicing and perfecting songs, rhythms, and dance steps. The troupe was clearly the 'happening thing' in town. I found devotion to the calendar of Vodú rituals valued as an expression of the troupe's authenticity and as a spiritual bond that knit the community together.

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<sup>93</sup> I first visited Cuba to participate in a two-week dance program hosted by a professional folkloric troupe, the Ballet Folklórico Cutumba, and returned annually over the next decade.



Figure 11 – Grupo Folklórico Thompson – ©Viddal 2008

Troupe membership prompts thoughtful consideration of how to perform dance steps or drum sequences, the meanings of words and songs, and focuses new generations on improving their execution of these Haitian customs. Salsa, reggaeton, rap, and other popular genres hold less sway, as does absorption into more prevalent Cuban spiritual traditions such as Santería. During a conversation on February 22, 2009, founding members Isabel Solo Soyé and her son Jean remarked that during the era of Batista, singing and dancing Gagá and performing Haitian music was a very local phenomenon. Villagers in Thompson held fiestas during Holy Week and sometimes paraded to other *bateyes* that belonged to the same *central*, or sugar factory. They explained that it was not until Joel James and the Casa del Caribe inaugurated the Festival del Caribe that Haitian traditions became a recognized part of a larger regional cultural system, because the Festival offered a recurring and consistent space for the performance of Haitian identity. Today, folkloric groups—initially sponsored by culture programmers and institutions,

later springing from the efforts of *haitiano-cubanos* themselves—are a key aspect in both maintaining and popularizing Haitian identity and culture in eastern Cuba

### With the Spirits at the Milanés'

Brothers Tato and Pablo Milanés, whose father emigrated from Haiti in the 1920s, are prosperous farmers who live in the Sierra Maestra mountains in eastern Cuba. They are also well-known priests of Vodú. Although Tato lives on a mountaintop farm with no electricity, plumbing, or vehicle (besides his horse), clients from as far away as the capital seek him out for consultations. In October 2008, accompanied by colleagues from Casa del Caribe, I visited him. Arriving disheveled after crossing two rivers and revving up a twisty mountain trail in the institute's jeep, we found a youth in low-slung jeans, gold chains, and a fashionable cap sitting on Tato's patio, fiddling with his cell phone and complaining about lack of reception. The young man explained that he lived in Havana, but had made a journey to the farm for in-depth work to complement a consultation he had received during Tato's last visit to the capital. Vodú has spread from rural enclaves to urban centers. Both Tato and Pablo regularly travel to Havana where they are eagerly awaited by clients and spiritual godchildren and lavishly hosted.

Pablo has become a something of a spokesperson for the Haitian community in Cuba. He is invited to festivals and events as a keynote presence, and has visited Haiti three times as the guest of cultural NGOs. He also directs a folkloric troupe that parades every year in the Festival del Caribe, and often supervises a public ritual during the festival. Although government officials were not always supportive, the Casa del Caribe pushed boundaries soon after its founding by staging not only orderly re-enactments of rituals presented as dance shows, but presenting actual rituals as a part of its festival programming. This continues today. The Casa del Caribe's budget provides funds for rum, sacrificial animals and other ritual necessities during festivals.

Practitioners appreciate institutional support in buying sacrificial animals and other items for the spirits. I have spoken with many practitioners who collectively exclaim that they feel that rituals staged for the public are as “authentic” as any they might do at home. Those attending the public rituals, whether general festival-goers, or television crews or anthropologists, confirm the status of Haitian spiritual culture within Cuban national identity.



Figure 12 – Pablo Milanés dancing at a Vodú event sponsored by the Casa del Caribe – ©Viddal 2009

Use of the word Vodú is relatively recent in place of “serving the spirits” or “serving the mysteries.” Practitioners tend to describe events as “parties for the saints” (“fiestas del santo”)



rather than “ceremonies” or “rituals.” Some are held to coincide with saint’s days, others whenever a family can raise the resources or receives help from an institute or organization. The spirits are the guests of honor who will attend in the form of trance possession. They are invited and coaxed with singing, music, dance, and attractive tables or altars set with food and drink.



Figure 13 – Emilio Milanés Zamora drumming at a Vodú event in Pilon del Cauto – ©Viddal 2010

In April 2010 I attended a three-day celebration for the Vodú spirits at the home of Pablo Milanés in Pilon del Cauto in the Sierra Maestra mountains in Santiago province. The penetration of institutions into many *haitiano-cubano* communities runs deep. Amateur folkloric

performance troupes have become ubiquitous, and almost all are tied to culture bureaucracies that provide budgets for costumes and transportation, however modest. Joined by bonds of friendship and collegiality, the director of the Casa del Caribe, Orlando Vérges, attended Pablo Milanés' spirit fete, bringing along cases of rum, and a truckload of other party guests, including Santiago's most famous sculptor, Alberto Lescaj, and a young group of practicing Paleros from the city. Institutional sponsorship of rituals in Cuba is not unlike current practices I observed in Haiti, whereby Haitians living in the first world diaspora fund Vodou events in their home village, or intellectuals, artists, politicians, or rock bands patronize large Vodou temples. Many Vodú families in Cuba have ties to institutions, and their ritual specialists regularly preside over public rituals at festivals.

The term that believers use for these events —calling them “parties” for the spirits— sheds light on perceptions of authenticity. A fete may be enhanced by institutional donations of food and drink, VIP guests, and media coverage. Vodú practice in Cuba also includes the work spiritual consultants do in healing clients, private magics, initiations, or small family events, and they do guard their professional secrets, but as the above enhancement suggests, notions of “pure” ceremonies hosted for and by “insider” groups can be illusory.

### Vodú in Cuba

What is the relationship of Cuban Vodú to Haitian Vodou? It can be tempting to classify the Cuban version as an “antique” practice, an older version of Haitian Vodou, preserved by lack of contact with its homeland. Cuban Vodú does reflect characteristics of the *braceros*. Haiti of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was more regional (and many *braceros* were from southern Haiti) and less centralized before deforestation, land seizures by elites and by US companies, and military

occupation displaced peasants to the cities and abroad. Rural Vodou practice was largely familial, with the patriarch or matriarch as ritual specialist tending inherited spirits called *lwa*.<sup>94</sup> Today, urbanization is a standardizing factor, and many temples in the capital maintain a branch in the lead ritual specialist's home village.<sup>95</sup> It is more hierarchical, with more elaborate initiations. While Vodú in Cuba has many common points with the family-centered practices of rural Haiti of decades past, it is not a museum of 1920s Vodou, but has adapted and changed in its new environment.<sup>96</sup> Also, despite the interplay of spiritual practice and staged folklore performance in Cuba, Vodú is certainly alive as a spiritual practice as well as a public art form. It does not survive "only as folklore."

What is the relationship of Vodú to other spiritual practices in Cuba? Santería, also called Regla de Ocha, the most emblematic Afro-Cuban spiritual practice, is linked to beliefs brought to Cuba by slaves from the Yoruba ethnic region of Nigeria.<sup>97</sup> It has become a ubiquitous symbol of Cuba's African heritage, and the religion's brightly costumed dancing deities adorn labels of rum bottles, post cards, and hotel restaurant menus. However, Santería emerged in western Cuba, specifically Havana and Matanzas, only spreading to *oriente* in the early twentieth century (Wirtz 2007). Now common in urban areas, its pantheon of charismatic deities and colorful symbols have penetrated other spiritual practices, as for example when believers use Santería vocabulary, explaining that the Vodú *luá* Ecili Freyda is "like Ochun" or the deity Lucero "is the Congo version of Elegua." The various branches of Regla de Palo or Regla Congo have also

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<sup>94</sup> Also rendered as *loa* (presumed to be related to the French word *loi*, or "law") or *luá* in Cuba.

<sup>95</sup> My thanks to ethnographer Katherine Smith for this observation.

<sup>96</sup> For more on Cuban Vodú vis-à-vis Haitian belief systems, see Alexis Alarcón's "¿Vodú en Cuba o Vodú cubano?" (1988).

<sup>97</sup> For discussion of the history of Santería, see Bolívar Aróstegui (1990), Palmié (2002), and Brown (2003).

fluidly entered *oriente* from the west, although initiation remains much less expensive than in Santería, and many practitioners use it conjunction with other systems.

Traditionally, eastern Cuba has been a stronghold of Spiritism (*espiritismo*) and folk Catholic devotions such as celebrating saint's days, making pilgrimages, and fulfilling *promesas* ("promises" or resolutions) to secure holy intercession. "Muerterismo" is becoming a more common term to describe spiritist ancestor veneration (see Millet 1999). And, there is *bembé de sao*. In Cuban vernacular a *bembé* refers to a party for the spirits, and *sao* means "bush," connoting backwoods, so a *bembé de sao* is roughly translatable as "bembé of the bush" or a rural spirit ritual, usually mixing practices from various belief systems, mirroring the background of local practitioners, from *espiritistas* to *vodouistas*.

Whether and how Vodú in Cuba has incorporated influences from other Cuban practices depends on the community and practitioner. Spiritism is visible in the many "stair-step" style altars (as opposed to flat on a table or on the ground) constructed by Vodú practitioners in Holguín province, a stronghold of *espiritismo*. The Haitian language terms "manbo" and "oungan" for ritual specialists are sometimes replaced by the "santero" and "santera" more familiar to Cuban clients. In both Barrancas and Santiago city I met specialists who treated clients with a mixture of Vodú practices taught to them by their Haitian fathers and Spiritist philosophies cherished by their Cuban mothers. Many *haitiano-cubanos* hold their biggest spiritual festivities during the month of December, rather than on the saints' days traditional in Haiti, reflecting the importance in Cuba of celebrating Santa Barbara on the 4<sup>th</sup> and San Lazaro on the 17<sup>th</sup>. Some *luá*, like Gran Buá (Gran Bwa in Haiti), are relatively unimportant in Haiti,

while in Cuba the opposite is true.<sup>98</sup> Gran Buá is regularly feted at celebrations across the eastern provinces of Cuba and is an important inherited deity in a number of Vodú families.



Figure 14 – Spiritist style Vodú altar at a museum event honoring Haitian heritage in San Germán – ©Viddal 2008

Today, a few *haitiano-cubanos* are able to travel to Haiti. As mentioned earlier, the Milanés brothers, likely Cuba’s most famous *oungans*, have visited Haiti as guests of cultural organizations. The Creole Choir of Cuba has made several trips to Haiti, most recently to perform in displaced-persons camps following the 2010 earthquake.<sup>99</sup> Some Cubans of Haitian heritage have asked Cuban doctors completing missions in Haiti to search for family members or befriended Haitian medical students on scholarship in Cuba. It is possible for Cubans who can prove a Haitian parent or grandparent to get a tourist visa from the Haitian Embassy in Havana, forgoing a more complex process necessitating letters of invitation. I know of two members of

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<sup>98</sup> During informal conversations between 2008 and 2011, Pablo Milanés confirmed my observations, remarking that during his visits to Haiti he was surprised by the lack of attention dedicated to Gran Buá.

<sup>99</sup> Conversation with members of the choir on October 1, 2011. The choir, known as Grupo Vocal Desandann in Cuba, sings a repertoire in Haitian language.

folkloric groups who successfully secured visas and managed to raise the funds for one of the twice-weekly flights to Port au Prince from Santiago. Both bought items like jeans and watches in Haiti's markets and sold them for a profit on the black market in Cuba, allowing them to recoup travel costs and plan the next trip. One lamented that he had not be able to attend any Vodou events while in Haiti or find his Haitian family members. He stayed in the home of Cuban doctors running a clinic, and spent all his time shopping

New Festivals Dedicated to *Haitiano-Cubano* Culture

The Festival del Caribe grew branches such as the Eva Gaspar Festival in Violeta in Ciego de Avila province and the Bwa Kayiman Festival in San Germán in Holguín province. Both are organized by Haitian descendants: Ana Delia Marcial Reyez and Bertha Julia Noris respectively. Initially, both struggled with municipal culture ministries' lack of interest in valuing the Haitian contribution. Ana Delia works tirelessly to produce the festival with limited resources in a small town with no airport or international attractions. In San Germán, Bertha Julia found that authorities preferred to promote the town's Spanish heritage as more congruent with the image of the province. But the eventual success of both festivals has led to a surge in local pride and attention from scholars and tourism promoters.

The Eva Gaspar Festival in Ciego de Avila province was established in 1999 to commemorate the legacy of Eva Gaspar, who immigrated to Cuba from Haiti in 1918, becoming a tireless promoter of her native culture in her new country. It takes place in a town dominated by a sugar-mill and its large smokestack. A rail line transports cane. The small station house still proclaims "Violeta" although the municipality was re-named "Primero de Enero" after the socialist revolution.<sup>100</sup> With its enormous sugar processing plant, the town has been a destination

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<sup>100</sup> "Primero de Enero" or "First of January" refers to the date of the revolution in 1959. Subsequently, many towns, streets, parks, and factories in Cuba were re-named.

for cane cutters and processors for decades. In the early twentieth century, many of the laborers were Haitians and their descendants still live locally.



Figure 15 – The Eva Gaspar en Memorium festival – ©Viddal 2009

Every year the festival includes a country fair with children’s rides and snack vendors. It also features performances, an academic symposium, exhibits of traditional Haitian handicrafts and culinary arts, and “burning the devil” or *quema del diablo* in the town square after the closing parade. Typically, between ten and fifteen folkloric groups are invited to perform at the festival and are offered lodging in the dormitory of a nearby polytechnic school. The festival offers gasoline chits for their bus back to their hometown, but each group is responsible for procuring transportation *to* the festival, typically by soliciting a gasoline allotment from the municipal culture office in the town under which they are registered as a performing group, or from any institution that may be able to help. Festival director Ana Delia Marcial Reyez, herself

of Haitian descent, works for the municipal culture office. She focuses on inviting companies who perform a repertoire of Haitian-heritage dance and music, both *portadores* and troupes that combine genres to form “fusion” styles or “restorations” (*restauraciones*). Some of these groups, including Ana Delia’s own troupe, Nagó, include Cubans of various ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as Haitian descendants. The Festival Eva Gaspar has become Violeta’s biggest public event, and receives support from the Haitian Embassy in Havana, the University of Ciego de Avila, UNESCO, the Haitian Association of Cuba, and the Havana-based organization Bannzil Kiba Kreyol. Producers and programmers from the Casa del Caribe attend the Eva Gaspar Festival to scout talent for the next Festival del Caribe.

The festival features daytime and evening events, and always opens with a *desfile* or parade allowing all the groups to be seen and applauded. Evening performances gather crowds around a stage set up in the town park. In between reggaeton and the latest dance hits played by a DJ, folkloric troupes from small villages perform to the animated interest of the crowd. In 2009, the symposium featured presentations about Haitian contributions to local culture by scholars from regional universities, as well as Dr. Jean Maxuis Bernard, the cultural attaché for the Haitian Embassy in Havana. I saw youth decked out in their most stylish weekend gear mesmerized by troupes of villagers performing old fashioned dances, ignoring a DJ ready to get back to spinning reggaeton hits.





Figure 16 – Norberto of Grupo Nagó parading as the Roi Diablé at the Eva Gaspar festival – ©Viddal 2009



Figure 17 –Bonito Patuá dancers performing a Haitian Merengue on the evening stage – ©Viddal 2009

The Festival Eva Gaspar takes place for a week in March or April coinciding with a vacation week at the local polytechnic school, whose dormitory is used to house the hundred or more visiting performers. Since the Festival del Caribe in Santiago is always July 3-9, the timing of Eva Gaspar Festival allows talent searchers from Santiago or, even better, Havana to attend in time to invite groups to larger summer or fall festivals in Santiago or Havana. As well as being a

gathering for more than one hundred performers in various troupes, it attracts day-trippers from neighboring towns with its combination of country fair and cultural festival. Locals of all backgrounds also eagerly await it; it is not just popular among Cubans of Haitian heritage. During the 2010 festival I fell into conversation with a grandmother sitting next to me on a park bench. Señora Solar, with fair skin and red-brown hair, did not appear to be of Haitian descent. She told me stories of the town during her youth, and reminisced about learning a number of words in *patuá* or Creole because so many speakers of Haitian language lived in town. She recited her vocabulary for me.<sup>101</sup> The obvious pride with which this white Cuban grandmother demonstrated her Haitian language skills to a foreigner in town for the festival underscores that in the post-revolutionary Cuban economy of folklore, the rise of a new folkloric imaginary has begun to transmute formerly denigrated cultural markers into a kind of ethnic cachet.

Like the Festival del Caribe, the Festival Eva Gaspar includes a public ritual, hosted each year by a different ritual specialist. In 2010, the ritual was dedicated to the Vodú spirit Togo,<sup>102</sup> a divinity represented by a powerful bull, and presided over by Tomas Poll Jr. from the town of Morón. Poll is an *oungan* and also the director of the folkloric group Renacer Haitiano. The ritual was originally scheduled for the town park, but after some discussion, organizers decided the event—with its potentially unruly possession trances and feeding the spirits with animal blood—should be moved to the home of Venancio, an elder of Haitian descent who lived nearby. Everyone present lit a candle and placed it on the ground around a simple altar featuring water, rum, coffee, an egg, sweets, and other foods. In Cuba it is costly (and requires permission from local authorities) to kill a bull, as would be traditional for Towo in Haiti. During the ritual, Poll,

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<sup>101</sup> Her vocabulary included: *diri* – rice, *kochon* – pig, *pwa* – peas/beans, *kabrit* – goat, and *makout* – bag or sack (in Haitian language spellings using current orthography).

<sup>102</sup> Spelled “Towo” in Haitian Creole orthography.

mounted by Togo, crouched astride a *verraco* (boar) before sacrificing it, a Cuban adaptation of the offering.



Figure 18 – *Oungan* Poll Jr. as Togo wrestling with the sacrificial boar at the Eva Gaspar festival – ©Viddal 2009

The Festival Eva Gaspar, like the Festival del Caribe, concluded with the “burning of the devil” or *quema del diablo* at midnight of the last day. After a short ritual including libations and prayers by elders of the Haitian-heritage community, a large scarecrow-like figure constructed of wood and burlap was torched. Townspeople whooped and waved; some danced or took photos with their cellphone cameras. At the close of the Festival Eva Gaspar, a professor from the local university urged that state promoters of tourism arrange transportation from the provincial capital and resort hotels, arguing that the Haitian-Cuban festival was an underexploited resource.

The sign welcoming visitors to the town of San Germán in Holguín province is shaped like its famous *central*, Urbano Noris<sup>103</sup>, a sugar-processing factory with signature smokestacks. I arrived on August 14, 2008, to attend the first annual Festival Bwa Kayiman.<sup>104</sup> For years, event organizer Bertha Julia Noris —a provincial culture functionary of Haitian descent— wanted to commemorate the town’s Haitian mill laborers.<sup>105</sup> However, authorities preferred to promote the town’s Spanish legacy as more congruent with their image of the province. Nevertheless, Noris persisted, and in 2008 San Germán hosted its first Haitian heritage festival.<sup>106</sup> The celebration featured museum displays, an academic colloquium, a culinary competition, folkdance in the town auditorium, and a public Vodú ritual held at the home of a local practitioner.



Figure 19 – Bertha Julia Noris, organizer of the Bwa Kayiman festival – ©Viddal 2008

The culinary skills exhibit in the park next to the cathedral was popular. Three tables were laden with examples of recipes and herbal remedies. Bouquets of fresh herbs featuring hand written placards explaining their properties and use were displayed on the first table, followed by tables laden with dishes such as *pé maiz* (a corn

bread pudding) and desserts such as *tablét grá féy* (a crispy sweet made with sugar and milk).

The cultural attaché from the Haitian Embassy in Havana offered a short keynote speech and a

<sup>103</sup> Urbano Noris is the name of the both sugar factory in San Germán and the municipality in which the town is located.

<sup>104</sup> Bwa Kayiman (alligator forest) refers to a legendary ritual held August 14, 1791 in the north of Haiti by slaves plotting against the colonial French regime. The ensuing rebellion launched the Haitian Revolution.

<sup>105</sup> Noris wrote a masters thesis about Haitian laborers in Urbano Noris in the early twentieth century.

<sup>106</sup> Full name “Encuentro de la cultura haitiana: Festival Bwa Kayiman”

local television station recorded events. The museum exhibit featured examples of handicrafts and implements, including an embroidered bedspread, culinary herbs, a *pilón* —or large mortar and pestle of the type used in rural Haiti to grind coffee, terra cotta jugs for *tifey* —a drink made with rum and aromatic plants. There was also a Vodú altar set up in the local style, on stair-step shelves with plaster saints representing Haitian and Cuban spirits. An evening show in the town's auditorium featured two dance companies: Renovación Haitiano de San Germán and another from neighboring Cueto. It was followed by a Vodú ritual held at the home of a local practitioner. Although the ceremony did not get started until 12:30am, representatives from the municipal culture office attended, followed by a news cameraman unsuccessfully trying to rig up a klieg light in order to record the event. The Bwa Kayiman Festival is slated to become a biennial event and already there is enthusiasm to sponsor further activities based on ethnic contributions, such as a Spanish heritage festival and a museum display commemorating an influential local family of Japanese immigrants.

Both the Eva Gaspar Festival and the newer Bwa Kayiman Festival attract the attention of academics, journalists, and tourism promoters and contribute to a re-visioning of Haitian heritage as a feature of the *oriente* region as a whole. Participation by Cubans who are not of Haitian descent has become ubiquitous. Cubans of varied backgrounds attended both Festival Eva Gaspar and Bwa Kayiman. *Oungan* Tomas Poll's folkloric troupe, Renacer Haitiano, includes members who are not of Haitian descent, as does the artist's collective Taller Ennegro. While Cubans have long visited Haitian herbalists and ritual specialists for cures and consultations, Vodú has become part of the repertoire of at least one well-known Havana-based santera, as we shall see in the next section. Just as Santería is no longer associated with *lucumí*

(Yoruba) parentage, Vodú has spread outside *haitiano-cubano* enclaves, perhaps growing into a regional as much as ethnic symbol.



Figure 20 – Renacer Haitiano includes dancers of varied heritage – ©Viddal 2008

### Vodú Chic

Expertise in Vodú is becoming a sought-after spiritual skill in Cuba's capital city. For example, influential *santera* Nancy Pulles Méndez, the proprietor of "el Templo de Oyá," a large Santería sanctuary and religious art emporium in Havana, has been studying Vodú, with help from members of Los Misterios del Vodú, a folkloric dance troupe currently led by Silvia Gardes. The group, originally based in Santiago, moved

to Havana in pursuit of new opportunities. Gardes and Pulles co-sponsored a public ritual for the *luá* Oggún Ferraire in Gardes' home in Havana in March 2009. Pulles explains that she finds Vodú inspiring and is always seeking to expand her knowledge of African-rooted spirituality.<sup>107</sup> She has even enrolled in Haitian language classes. The Temple of Oya is becoming a channel for disseminating Vodú in Cuba's capital.

Vodú priest Tato's son Emilio Milanés Zamora is a member of "El Taller Experimental Ennegro," an artists' collective in Palma Soriano, a town in Santiago province. The group includes sculptors, actors, musicians, dancers, and ritual specialists. Ennegro artists take their inspiration from Vodú.<sup>108</sup> Creating art installations inspired by Vodú imagery is a specialty. A *vevé* is a Vodú symbol drawn on the ground for ritual occasions, traditionally using cornmeal or

<sup>107</sup> Personal conversation, March 19, 2009.

<sup>108</sup> From conversations with Emilio Milanés Zamora March 19, 2010, in Palma Soriano and May 4, 2010, in Santiago de Cuba.

flour. As the ritual proceeds, the participants' dancing feet erase the designs. For the Festival del Caribe 2010, Taller Ennegro created a mandala-like *vevé* from multi-colored sand depicting linked Cuban and Haitian flags and sacred symbols on the patio of the Teatro Heredia in Santiago. Sculptures and a temporary *ounfort* or “cai misté” (Vodú temple) completed the installation, with Taller Ennegro member *oungan* Jhosvany Milanés Carbonell offering blessings and greeting visitors (often while mounted by spirit).



Figure 21 – Jhosvany Milanés and the Taller Ennegro installation at the Festival del Caribe – ©Viddal 2010

Taller Ennegro have a bigger project underway, the “Proyecto de Eco-Arte y Economía Sostenible: Vevé de Afá” an artists’ colony and ecological shrine. To be situated on fallow land at a confluence of two rivers, the project proposal envisions community gardens, studios, ritual space, and a massive *vevé* fashioned from vegetation planted in designs that can be recognized from above. This eco-art project has been listed in the UN Habitat Best Practices Database.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> For more on the project, see <http://openarchitecturenetwork.org/projects/2032>.



The efforts of El Taller Experimental Ennegro exemplify new international relationships for avant-garde visions of practitioners of Cuban Vodú.

As *haitiano-cubano* Vodú reaches Cuba's capital, it becomes available to a wider clientele and its ethnic markers change. While still associated with Haiti, it is no longer necessarily practiced only by those of ethnic Haitian heritage, moving it into the realm of a wider Cuban cultural identity, exemplified by the activities of *santera* Nancy Pulles Méndez. Innovative artists such as the members of Taller Ennegro, likewise, open new areas for the expression of Vodú arts and aesthetics, tying them to a global currency of communitarian and ecological ideals.

## Conclusion

Haitian laborers and their descendants have been seen by both researchers and policy makers in Cuba as archetypical dispossessed and disadvantaged migrant workers holding firm to old-fashioned traditions carried from their homeland, with conditions of privation and segregation facilitating the preservation of time-honored customs. While migrants' preservation of lifeways and customs brought from afar has been attributed to isolation and poverty, the academy, political actors, commerce, and tourism have influenced the continuation of traditions in Cuba. As we have seen, in the province of Santiago, trained professionals in the genre of folklore researched local traditions and recruited people of Haitian heritage to help them expand their repertory, and in doing so, changed the scope of what is considered regional culture. Next, institutes and ethnographers also imbricated themselves into *haitiano-cubano* communities, resulting in long term relationships, interconnection, and projects. As the political environment of Cuba changed after the Soviet bloc dissolved, folklore became an important currency in new arenas.

*Haitiano-cubanos* became increasingly active agents in the dissemination of their culture to a larger public. Haitian culture in Cuba is braided into the economy of folklore. Festivals and performance have become important motivators in the preservation and renovation of Haitian spiritual practices, music, dance, and language. The creation of folkloric dance and music groups motivates new generations to learn customs associated with their Haitian identity. People of Haitian descent in Cuba have found innovative ways to work against the discrimination and marginalization they face. In a country where national identity balances between socialist values and endorsing the country's rich legacy of African-inspired performance arts and spiritual systems, Vodú has begun to take its place as a recognized element in Cuba's national identity and perhaps even in some circles, as the latest frontier of the eco-artistic avant-garde.

## Chapter Four

*“Yo soy cubano, pero soy haitiano también”* (“I’m Cuban, but I’m Haitian too”):

### Embracing Haitian Identity in Cuba

#### The Attraction of a Hyphenated Ethnicity

Claiming a Haitian identity in twenty-first century Cuba involves embracing and valorizing the culture of an acutely marginalized and disparaged ethnic group, while both preserving and transforming its traditions. Most *haitiano-cubanos* in Cuba today are the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of agricultural laborers who arrived in Cuba during the early decades of the twentieth century. They differentiate themselves from the general Afro-Cuban population by claiming connection with this long-denigrated ethnic group. In order to explore why many uphold their Haitian identity with such fervor, I will narrate the stories of *haitiano-cubanos* who relish and publicly perform their Haitian heritage. I also will consider what an allegiance to Haitian identity may entail in Cuba today.

*Haitiano-cubanos* are attracted to folkloric performing for a range of reasons and participate in different ways. This chapter examines these motivations and explores how the benefits of publically performing ethnicity are manifested and perceived. These vignettes highlight varied inspirations for embracing a duple ethnic allegiance. I also consider the context and influence of Cuban economic, civic, and social environments in the development of *haitiano-cubano* performance as a way of life and explore the relationship between Haitian-heritage-identified performers and the state.

Ethnomusicologist Kevin Delgado observes that Afro-Cuban spiritual philosophies are multifaceted and may be “simultaneously religion, subculture, national culture, pan-African

diaspora culture, pop culture, subject of study, and commodity” (2009:63). Folkloric performance by *haitiano-cubanos* on the surface might, in fact, appear to serve contradictory purposes: it can help generate private income in a socialist setting—in fact the leisure and resources to do it are part of the fabric of the socialist state; it can be an articulation of religious fervor, sponsored by an officially atheistic state; it is both a means of claiming belonging in the Cuban state and a way to critique it and even declare independence from it, as well as, in some cases, create the possibility for citizenship elsewhere; it simultaneously expresses both Cuba’s ideal of radical social equality and points to a need to express racial pride; and it celebrates some of the very qualities that have been part of stereotyping this much maligned ethnic group. It also provides avenues for artistic expression, continuing education, and local and international travel. As we seek to understand the roles folkloric performance plays in Cuba, we must begin by considering the context of the Cuban state.

### The Importance of a Free Lunch

Coming from a capitalist country to live and conduct research in Cuba, I regularly found myself flummoxed or vexed by the differences between their system and my own. Recognizing that the socialist system operated within a distinct logic helped me begin to grasp the Cuban perspective and to think about the role of alternative subjectivities and ethnic performance within it. Most Cubans today came of age under a system that promoted collectivist concepts of work, leisure, social contribution, volunteerism, and the distribution of consumer goods. The goal was fostering radical equality, not consumerism. Salaries in the new revolutionary society were set very low because most daily necessities from lunch to light bulbs were provided by the workplace, assigned by ration card, or meted out for meritorious contributions. Salaries were

meant to be for discretionary spending and indulgences, not necessities.

Banco de Crédito y Comercio is located on the corner of Aguliera and San Pedro streets near a central plaza in Santiago de Cuba. I arrived on a hot sunny afternoon during the spring of 2010 to find the bank—the largest in the city—closed. Befuddled tourists and frustrated Cubans milled around in front, the tourists asking where they could change money and the Cubans brandishing their bankbooks. A frazzled security guard entreated, “The bank has closed for the day! Come back tomorrow!” I returned the next day only to find a repeat of the situation: the bank shut, puzzled foreigners and exasperated Cubans out front. The following day I tried phoning before setting off for downtown. An employee informed me that the bank was closing for the third day in a row because ... staff lunches had not been delivered. Each day, she explained, when hot lunches failed to arrive by noon, the bank closed and employees were sent home to *resolver* (“resolve”) a meal on their own. She didn’t know the reason for the problem. Perhaps the state kitchen assigned to provide the meals had not received its propane allotment and couldn’t cook the food, or maybe thieves had siphoned the delivery truck’s gas quota. Salaries being low, no worker was expected to buy a sandwich in the street simply in order to keep the bank open. Early closures continued until lunch deliveries resumed at the end of the week.

During a sweltering July day in 2010, sitting in the international terminal of Antonio Maceo airport staring out the window of the departure lounge onto the tarmac, I observed my plane—an Aero Caribbean flight from Havana coming to pick up passengers in Santiago de Cuba before continuing on to Santo Domingo—arriving before schedule. “Yes!” I thought, “My flight is actually going to leave on time!” But hours passed, and the dozen or so other passengers and I shifted and sighed on our plastic benches. Eventually, I noticed an acquaintance arriving to

begin his work shift at a service desk, and I wandered over to see if he knew anything. The flight team's lunch is late, my friend sympathized, but once it finally arrives, he assured me, the crew will eat and then the plane can take off. Pilots and flight attendants in Cuba don't earn enough to be expected to buy their own lunch at the airport. So my plane sat on the tarmac, waiting for beans and rice. To my U.S. sensibilities, this seemed preposterous. But the Cuban system was set up to deliver radical equality, not consumer comfort (Moore 2006a: 4-10, Carter 2008:135) Examining how it shapes daily life on the island generates insight into various social phenomena, including ethnic allegiance.

Since Cuban salaries are very low, a system of state subsidies underpins everything from food to housing to work shoes. The state, for example, provides a monthly ration card, known as a *libreta*, for use at the neighborhood *bodega* assigned to each family unit. To my foreign eyes, at first most *bodegas* appeared dim and bare, with cracked countertops and flimsy shelving, but these little depots are a quotidian facet of the Cuban landscape. A scratched chalkboard usually features the rations that have arrived and lists quantities. Queuing up to present the *libreta* to a worker who checks off the collected rations is part of the daily routine for most families. Monthly rations in 2008-2009 typically included rice, beans, some protein in the form of eggs and a few ounces of tinned meat, sugar and salt, possibly some root vegetables, and items like soy yogurt or powdered milk for children and pregnant women.<sup>110</sup>

The state provides citizens with daily bread. Each evening, a *panadero* distributes one bread roll per household member, checking off a list as his cart rattles down city streets. In fact, almost everything has until recently been distributed by an allotment procedure or other systems of reward, although cutbacks have started. For example, many laborers collect a pair of rubber boots and a set of work clothes annually. Students receive pencils and notebooks. Decades ago,

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<sup>110</sup> For more on the food ration system, see Garth (2009).

the *libreta* provided two packs of cigarettes and a bottle of rum per month, and this perk is still grandfathered into older citizens' ration books. It's not unusual to see retirees sitting in parks or along busy streets displaying a pack of *populares* for sale because they don't smoke and need the extra *pesos*. A color television or other appliance has been a typical prize for never being tardy to work. Cuban salaries were meant to cover only leisure and incidentals. To wit, most workplaces and schools serve lunch. Breakfast in Cuba is typically a bread roll and a mouthful of coffee (or, for children, powdered milk from the ration card heated with a dollop of coffee). Dinner is a light meal, perhaps a soup made from leftovers. Lunch is the important meal of the day. It is not unusual to meet people who chose their job based on the purported quality of *el almuerzo* since most workplaces provide their employees with a free lunch. Cuban streets and neighborhoods are dotted with *comedores*, or cafeterias, specifically for police, street cleaners, or anti-mosquito inspectors. Telephone company workers, factory employees, and airport staff all have their own dining halls. The midday repast has traditionally been the main meal of the day in Cuba. Since the Cuban workweek lasts six days, households need only "resolve" the traditional Sunday family gathering. In Cuba the system of government subsidies literally decides what most citizens will eat for breakfast and lunch.

The apparatus of the government touches every home and hamlet. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) cover every city block and rural areas, too. The state controls media outlets.<sup>111</sup> Before changes introduced in 2011, cars, land, and homes could not be sold openly, and it is still not permitted to accumulate multiple domiciles and become a landlord. It has been illegal to buy construction materials or repair supplies on the black market rather than

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<sup>111</sup> With a recent exception: TeleSUR, a pan-Latin American television network headquartered in Venezuela, debuted on Cuban television while I was visiting the island in January, 2013. People expressed excitement about having ongoing, regular access to a foreign network, and many commented that international news coverage in particular seemed wide-ranging in comparison to the more controlled Cuban state networks.

waiting years or decades for government distribution. Although patrolling for illicit building supplies has been increasingly laxly enforced since the housing deregulations of 2011, an inspector's discovery of an unauthorized bag of cement stashed on a patio can still lead to jail time for "harboring stolen goods." Access to Internet services has been tightly controlled. Although changes are occurring, until recently simply adding a phone line entailed a labyrinthine process of official permissions. University attendance has been closed to certain categories of citizens, such as those not in good standing with their local CDR or youth who have been accused of "anti-revolutionary attitudes."

In recent years, the Cuban government has scaled back and even discussed eliminating the ration booklet, free lunch system, and other entitlements. Policy adjustments have been implemented since Fidel Castro retired in 2008, a process I discuss in more detail in the Epilogue. For the purposes of this chapter, we have explored the breadth of state power that has molded daily life during my period of fieldwork because it continues to be an important factor in the formation of selfhood in Cuba. While under review because Fidel Castro's successor—his younger brother Raul Castro—faces exigent need to cut spending and scale back inefficiencies, the presence of the regime's subsidies has shaped the realities, expectations, and strategies of Cubans for over half a century.

In a country where the state has planned what citizens eat twice a day, six days a week — may personal pastimes, hobbies, artistic pursuits, music, religion or any alternate subjectivities become sites of autonomy, ways to carve out private space in the context of a paternalistic state? Or, as my Cuban colleagues contend, does the state's system of cradle-to-grave of entitlements (insofar as it functions in supplying citizens with daily basics: meals, a uniform for work or school, public transportation, healthcare, education), provide citizens with the time and freedom



to realize abilities and talents in civic, intellectual, or artistic spheres? In posing this question, I suggest no definitive answer, but rather seek to examine the Cuban perspective. The Cuban Revolution was conceived as a collective utopian project, specifically one that advocates for different values than the capitalist world against which it defines itself, explicitly prioritizing areas such as education and healthcare, while deemphasizing consumerism.<sup>112</sup>

#### Dissidence and Resistance or Inclusion and Unity?

Because the level of penetration of the Cuban state into daily life is considerable, is creating a “hyphenated ethnicity” a way to claim a space detached from an ever-present “big brother”? Many cultural researchers have found that in the context of highly controlling social or political systems, vaunting a distinct identity can be a socially acceptable form of protest, one subtle enough to avoid being tagged as dissidence while pushing boundaries of orthodoxy. Writing about the Rastafari movement in Cuba, Katrin Hansing explains that in the context of a state that polices conformity, “wearing dreads is never a neutral or arbitrary undertaking but rather a conscious decision to look different” and argues that “reggae music and lyrics are used by Rastas as instruments to talk and raise awareness about...silenced social issues...without, however, appearing too critical of the system and the state” (2005:162). Hansing argues that for Rastas, religion and music are spaces of nonconformity that can address issues of race and marginalization. Could this be the case for Cubans of Haitian descent as well? Are *haitiano-cubanos* using the arts, folkloric performance groups, and religion to articulate an alternate racial and ethnic perspective? Or are Haitian dance and music groups or Vodú temples examples of the socialist project’s successful integration of formerly marginalized ethnic and racial groups?

When the young revolutionary Fidel Castro overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959,

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<sup>112</sup> My thanks to ethnomusicologist Kjetil Klette Bøler for useful conversations about revolutionary values.

the new government began a process of dismantling institutionalized inequality and bringing education and social services to previously disenfranchised and impoverished sectors of the populace. The fervent architects of the “New Society” believed that Cuba’s legacy of social inequality and racial discrimination would be resolved through the practice of socialism. The post-revolutionary regime presumed that with the end of class differences and capitalist exploitation, racism and all forms of discrimination would dissolve. Once institutional segregation was eliminated, however, open dialogues on ingrained prejudices relating to race, ethnicity, or gender were considered pernicious to revolutionary unity (Domínguez 1978, de la Fuente 2001, Sawyer 2006, Hernandez-Reguant 2009, Espina Prieto and Rodríguez Ruiz 2010). Political theorist Jorge Domínguez explains, “On March 22, 1959, the revolutionary government ended legal race discrimination in Cuba. Clubs and beaches were opened to all... [The] revolutionary government claims to have solved the race problem; it has therefore become subversive to speak or write about its existence” (1978:225).

In contemporary Cuba, rural communities tend to be less restive than city environments. Those most disadvantaged saw the greatest benefit from the egalitarian policies and social welfare projects initiated after the Revolution, and today many remain dedicated to socialist doctrine and principals. Historian Robert Hornel describes conditions in rural eastern Cuba just before the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro, where most “farmers worked plots of less than one hectare, and many...were without legitimate tenure” (1976:247). He explains that many squatters or *precaristas*, became *desalojos*, or evicted persons, who, “driven by desperation, made their camps alongside Oriente’s few public highways” and recounts, by “mid-century, Oriente still had few decent roads and much of her area was inaccessible except during the dry season. Her population was still mostly rural, illiterate, ill-fed, and unskilled. The great majority

of her work force was agriculturalist and most were only employed during the zafra [cane harvest season] (1976:247). Historian Louis Pérez concurs, noting that at mid-century, wealth and resources were concentrated in Havana, and many rural Cubans lived “in desperate conditions, without access to minimum educational, health, and housing facilities” (1995:295).

Hilario Batista, the son of a Haitian cane cutter and a Cuban-born woman with Haitian parents, is today a journalist and the director of the Haitian Creole department at Radio Habana Cuba in Havana, a station dedicated to broadcasting the Cuban perspective on international news in many languages. He remembers a difficult childhood in various towns in eastern Cuba, living in dirt floor homes, sleeping in hammocks made of burlap sacks, eating boiled root vegetables with little meat, and being mocked when he first arrived in first grade speaking Creole instead of Spanish. His parents were so poor that they left their children in the care of friends and neighbors while they traversed large areas in search of seasonal work. Hilario also recalls admirable values in the Haitian communities: respect for elders, knowledge of cooking and curing with herbs, and spiritual faith, which in the case of his family was Protestantism, not Vodú. He applauds the ideals of the socialist project and attests, “I have many reasons for loving my Revolution, for what it has meant to the Haitian communities in Cuba. Also, I do not know of another country that has worked harder to end injustice and racial discrimination, even sending help beyond its borders, to Haiti and Africa” (quoted in León Rojas 2012:15, also related in personal conversations, 2008 to 2013).

Many rural laborers of Haitian descent remain inspired by the ideals of the Cuban revolution and steadfastly support the Castro brothers’ leadership. In particular, seniors remember what life was like in *oriente* during the 1940s and 1950s and applaud the changes wrought after the 1959 Revolution. While traveling in *haitiano-cubano* enclaves in eastern Cuba,

I found that elders inevitably recounted how the Revolution brought free schools and medical care to rural areas. They proudly spoke of their grandchildren, now educated as nurses or agronomists. Others explained that the state farms, and more recently, farmers' cooperatives, were an improvement over the seasonal labor and hungry periods their families endured before land reform and entitlement programs like the ration card.<sup>113</sup> Many indicated that the inauguration of citizenship and government pensions for migrant laborers during the 1960s was a source of pride, despite the fact that today those pensions don't have much purchasing power.<sup>114</sup> Crediting Fidel Castro as the impetus behind these regulations, a number of elders lauded his zeal in bringing social welfare and dignity to their communities.<sup>115</sup> Others patriotically recounted their activities during the revolutionary years.

Elena Sansón Marquez, currently in her eighth decade, has a thriving consulting and healing practice in the Los Pinos neighborhood of Santiago.<sup>116</sup> A busy mambo and Spiritist, she is one of the few practitioners located in the city; most are in rural areas. Both of her parents were Haitian, arriving in Cuba in 1913. Neither worked in the cane fields. Her father was a recruiter for a sugar mill and her mother cooked for workers. *Mambo* Elena recounted that as a

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<sup>113</sup> During the 1990s, the Cuban government transformed many state farms into workers' collectives, called UBPCs ("Unidad Básica de Producción Cooperativa" or Basic Unit of Cooperative Production) in an attempt to stimulate food production and alleviate the shortages of the Special Period. Workers' groups were given long-term rights to use government land, greater managerial autonomy, and incentives such as profit sharing.

<sup>114</sup> See Pérez de la Riva (1979:74-75) and Gomez Navia (2005:38) for more detailed description of the pension decrees, including Resolution 202 of October 28, 1967, awarding Haitians resident in Cuba a monthly pension of 40 pesos, which seeks to "recompense" these workers in accordance with the revolutionary values of eliminating "exploitation and discrimination," and explicitly highlighting their "sweat and sacrifice" carried out under "inhuman conditions" for the "enrichment of landowners" (translations mine).

<sup>115</sup> Fidel Castro mentions the exploitation of Haitian and Jamaican sugar cane workers in the Cuban Republic in several oratories, including a speech addressing the Science Workers Congress in 1992 and a 1994 news conference. See the lanic database for English transcriptions of these speeches: <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1992/19920330-1.html> and <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1994/19940526.html>.

<sup>116</sup> My thanks to Dioscorides Rodríguez Salazar for introducing me to his godmother *Mambo* Elena and for his assistance in conducting interviews with her.

youth in the town of Cueto in Holguín province, she participated in secret rebel actions against dictator Fulgencio Batista and in the storming of the army barracks in December 1958, and she proudly emphasized her lifelong commitment to the Revolution.

Mirta, a member of Grupo Folklórico La Caridad in the village of Ramon de Guaninao, announced during one of my visits, “while I would love to visit Haiti to see the land of my ancestors, I am Cuban, and I feel lucky to live in a free country.”<sup>117</sup> Those of us visiting from Santiago, city folks all, flared our eyes at one another upon hearing Cuba extolled as a bastion of freedom, but I learned not to underestimate the fidelity that many *haitiano-cubanos* feel for the Cuban system.



Figure 22 – Julio García Lay and the author in 2008. Photo courtesy of Antonio Mejías Limonta.

Julio, Mirta’s husband and the current director of the troupe, explained that there is ongoing government support for the aficionado movement in Cuba.<sup>118</sup> Workplaces are obliged to give members of non-professional folkloric groups—or for that matter amateur basketball squads or chess clubs—leave from their work duties in order to compete or perform as long as the employee is in good standing and appropriate advance notice is received through authorized channels. Julio is the Director of Human

Resources for Palma Soriano’s medical center, a

<sup>117</sup> Conversation with Mirta Casal on November 30, 2008, in Ramón de Guaninao.

<sup>118</sup> Conversation with Julio García Lay on July 8, 2012, in Santiago de Cuba.

busy position with many responsibilities. Despite his demanding job, he is able to direct Grupo Folclórico La Caridad—attending rehearsals, performing, and traveling to gigs—because of national policies that prioritize workers’ interest in performance, the arts, literature, and sports. Believing that opportunities for individual self-development through hobbies and interests also strengthen the national body, Julio suggested that such liberty or entitlement is not always available to workers in capitalistic systems. Julio appreciates many of the revolutionary government’s Marxian ideals, including its commitment to support ordinary workers’ access to intellectual, artistic, and cultural pursuits.

Folkloric dance companies can be a vehicle for expressing dedication to the current regime and the ideals of the socialist project. During one of my visits to the village of Thompson, Odilia “Matiti” Solo Soyé, lead singer for the Grupo Folklórico Thompson, proudly introduced me to her daughters—Adriana, a teacher, and “Tita,” a medical student—and sang a song she composed that was an ode to Fidel Castro.<sup>119</sup> Solo Soyé explained that her group is appreciative of the opportunity to travel to the regional capital, Santiago, to participate in folk festivals, and that she hopes the group might even be invited abroad someday. She clarified that her participation is motivated by a desire to dispel stereotypes and project a positive image of Haitians, for the enjoyment of artistic expression, and noted that she feels grateful for the opportunity to share her culture that has been provided by the Cuban state’s support of folkloric performance groups.<sup>120</sup>

The Cuban state’s relationship with religion and the expression of ideas and identities has not been a static one. When the end of Soviet subsidies in the early 1990s left Cuba cut off and

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<sup>119</sup> Grupo Folklórico Thompson, under the name Grupo Baragua, was selected in 2011 to make an album with the Cuban recording company EGREM, which is scheduled for release in 2014.

<sup>120</sup> Conversation July 9, 2010

virtually bankrupt, the beleaguered government had to withdraw its grip from every aspect of economic life and communal activity. It began to allow limited categories of self-employment. It replaced many communal farms with agricultural cooperatives, and permitted more performers, artists, filmmakers, academics, and athletes to take advantage of invitations to travel abroad.

Change began to seep through the cracks of the system. Hernandez-Reguant explains:

As the spaces for public expression increased, partly due to the state's weakening and partly due to new commercial opportunity, so did reflective and critical versions of the social experience...multiple positions and consciousness of self and others based on race, generation, and sexuality, as well as diverse visions of citizenship, labor, property, community, altruism, and profit, marked a departure from an earlier social pressure to express a uniformity of experience (2009:3).

Room opened for the expression of new vantage points, including black subjectivities, especially within the arts. Historian Alejandro de la Fuente remarks, "By the mid-1990s, it had become increasingly difficult to argue that Cuba was the racial paradise that Cuban authorities and sympathetic observers once claimed. Like other forms of social inequality, racial disparities and racially defined tensions actually increased during 'the special period'" (2000:200). He observes, "Scholars in Cuba and abroad have reacted to this changing environment by conducting research on issues that were previously neglected...panels devoted to analyzing contemporary racial problems in Cuba have proliferated at national and international conferences" (2000:199-200).

After Cuba was cut off from Soviet patronage and began to open to foreign investment, to search for new international alliances, and to focus on tourism, certain sectors of society gained a little more autonomy. Arts events, performance, film festivals, religion, music, and culture in general were considered potential tourist attractions. They also served as a nexus of connection for international exchanges and collaborations, and gave Cubans new focal points for identity as the "Team Communist" ideal evaporated. Hernandez-Reguant notes that during the 1990s "Cuba saw an explosion of forms of popular culture...that immediately reflected on the intensity of

everyday life...[and] art, literature, theater, and music sought to...reach the embittered population” (2009:2).

Discussion of race, ideology, and nationhood, however, was by no means without limits, and by the end of the 1990s, the government began to reassert its control over daily economic activity and civic life. Stuffing the genie completely back in the bottle proved difficult.

Hernandez-Reguant emphasizes that even as the regime “reasserted its political control, the arrival of foreign stakeholders—companies, entrepreneurs, tourists—had extended the horizons of possibility for many people” and explains that changes particularly affected some sectors of society, saying “modes of expression, ethical views, and practical approaches to work, property, profit, and community were dramatically altered for many artists, media producers, cultural entrepreneurs, and, even, religious practitioners” (2009:6). Attitudes towards ethnic identity, racial pride, and spiritual practices altered during the Special Period, and those transformations continue in the twenty-first century.

Doors have opened for new expression of religious identities, too. In 1995 the Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba opened a museum in Havana to educate about Cuba’s African religious heritage. It also functions as a locale to host religious rituals and a meeting space for ritual experts. Sponsored by the government but formally an independent association, its activities overlap commercial, touristic, educational, and spiritual objectives (Wirtz 2004, Hearn 2008, Routon 2010). After Pope John Paul II visited the island in January of 1998, meeting with Fidel Castro and bringing international attention to Cuba, the government re-instated Christmas as a legal holiday. Artificial Christmas trees have become status symbols in the homes of those with the hard currency to purchase them, and are no longer considered evidence of a grave lapse in revolutionary commitment. Fourteen years later, Pope Benedict XVI touched down for a three-



day tour in March 2012, the second visit by a pope to the communist island. Acceding to his request that Good Friday be declared a legal holiday, the government gave workers the day off on April 6, 2012. The Ministry of the Interior even promoted the visit, posting the Pope's itinerary on a special website.<sup>121</sup>

Robin Moore observes that after Cuba's economic collapse following the end of the Soviet bloc, "public devotion has reestablished itself in the lives of Cubans to a surprising extent. This religious 'boom,' as it is often described, brought virtually all facets of the sacred into view. The relaxation of state policies towards religion may have been a calculated move to assure continued support for socialism among believers during severe food shortages" (2006a: 219). Moore remarks that religious conviction in general, including Christianity, "attracted more followers as life became difficult, as the future became uncertain, and the state proved unable to effectively fulfill its role as provider. Adopting an overtly religious lifestyle also represented a way of manifesting one's dissatisfaction with past dogmatism" (2006a: 220).

Once only a Jamaican phenomenon, Rastafari philosophy, accompanied by reggae music and dreadlocked hair, has become a globally recognizable lifestyle. In Cuba, dreds are rather less common than in the United States, and often associated in the public mind with street hustling and idling, in contrast to the hardworking proletarian or salt-of-the-earth *campesino*. Nevertheless, Rastafarianism stretches to even rural Cuba, and ranges from religious devotees to fans of the values, look, or music.

Anthropologist Katrin Hansing notes that in Cuba, Rastas tend to share a "nonconformist aesthetic and vision" and explains, "through their unconventional look and outlook Rastas, whether religious or popular cultural, defy the status quo and challenge what the state and society have deemed 'normal' and 'correct'...Rastafari acts as both a culture and an instrument of

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<sup>121</sup> See <http://benedictocuba.cubaminrex.cu/>.

resistance” (2005:157-158). Many Rastas in Cuba are cynical about government ideologies, tired of police profiling, and unsatisfied with the situation of blacks in Cuba. Hansing elucidates:

Rastas in Cuba, whether male or female, university educated or barely literate, from Havana or Santiago de Cuba, in large part share a common understanding of what their ‘Babylon’ in Cuba is. In most societies where Rastafari is present, this often-used term is normally equated with oppression and injustice most often associated with capitalism, racism and the police. So what is Babylon in a society whose system and official ideology is committed to social equality, justice, unity and freedom? In theory Rastafari and socialist principles and doctrine sound surprisingly similar. So what is Babylon in Cuba?...Cuba, in their eyes, is neither the egalitarian society nor the multi-racial democracy it claims to be and it is the power of this myth and the repressive forces, which keep it in place, that Cuban Rastas call Babylon (2005:151-153).

Although far from doctrinal Marxism, expressing religious commitment has become an acceptable facet of Cuban identity. This sentiment can be Catholic, Protestant, or a range of systems from Spiritism and Santería to Vodú or Rastafarianism, including artistic practices that are associated with spiritual philosophies. Many Cubans adopt multiple approaches simultaneously. For example, a friend in Cuba who danced and sang in a folklore company had been initiated into Palo Monte, attended church for baptisms and on holy days, participated in pilgrimages, sometimes consulted a Spiritist for family or work problems, and also held the post of “Ideologue” for his local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. His multiple allegiances don’t puzzle most Cubans, who are adept at construing life paths that both adhere to state doctrines and deviate from them.

What about folkloric dance companies? Since many create a repertoire by drawing on (previously notorious) spiritual traditions, are they—like the Rastafarian movement described by Hansing—potential spaces of social critique? Or are they typically just carrying out an upbeat and completely secular mission to positively represent the face of the nation?

Dance scholar Anthony Shay remarks that national folk dance ensembles are typically

political institutions, managed by government bureaucracies and fashioned to show a nation to advantage. He contends that such groups play “a role in the intricate minuet of international politics and diplomacy, creating colorful, exciting images” (2002:2). Professional folkloric dance companies are often comprised of fit, smiling, engaging young dancers who represent their nation and charm the global community. Shay comments that during the Cold War, the Soviet Union’s premier folkloric ensemble offered persuasive and upbeat images that contrasted briskly with the US government’s representations of the “evil empire,” saying, “appearances of the Moiseyev Dance Company became a political instrument without politicians” (2002:225).

The National Ballet of Senegal, a folkloric group, was created only a year after the country became independent in 1960. Initiated by first president Léopold Sédar Senghor and following his cultural nationalist policies, its aim was to represent the dignity, artistry, and unity of post-colonial Senegal. Dance scholar Francesca Castaldi notes that although the members of the National Ballet of Senegal are “experienced border crossers” today, the company’s style of production, scenography, and choreography highlights rural tradition, authenticity, and village life, making them congenial cultural ambassadors (2006:19). Analyzing the appeal of the National Ballet of Senegal for members, Castaldi explains “polyrhythmic drumming serves as a positive metaphor for historical time, opening up the communication with the past and tearing loose the fabric of colonial culture” and observes that particularly for youth, “dance and music have the power to blast through Francophone education, (re)calling them to a culture more consonant with their social and historical identity” (2006:203-204).

Although orthodox Marxist doctrine deems African-inspired spiritual practices obsolete, the Cuban state apparatus has nevertheless vigorously promoted Afro-Cuban cultural traditions as virtuosic artistic performance. Delgado observes that the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional and

other ensembles in Cuba “were prominent government showpieces meant to demonstrate to the nation and the world the inclusiveness and distinctive excellence of revolutionary Cuban society” (2009:54). Robin Moore, in *Music and Revolution*, asserts that key to the significance of “folklore” in Cuba is that it is not a relic of a bygone age but rather a “dynamic mode of expression rooted in the everyday lives of the population, one that continues to develop” (2006a: 196). He makes the case that Afro-Cuban religions generate an alternative history “confirming the place of African religions within Cuban society” and demonstrate “the Afro-Cuban community’s desire for religious self-determination,” which has “helped create alternate histories and memories that contested official discourse” (2006a: 201). In *Cuban Festivals: A Century of Afro-Cuban Culture*, Judith Bettelheim muses, “Where does one draw the line between public expressions of ethnicity accomplished with pride and ‘folkloric propaganda’?” (2001:124). Describing haitiano-cubano folklore companies, she answers her own query, proposing, “the presence of these communities in Santiago de Cuba and more rural areas of oriente province today speaks to an ongoing system of survival and self-rule, subsumed under the rubric of a national folklore agenda” (2007:13). She continues, “The state has neutralized potential resistance by incorporating these elements into ‘official culture.’ At the same time, these same communities continue to perform difference, their own history and their own culture” (2007:23). While performing the unity of the nation, folkloric groups may simultaneously enact their self-determination, including regional distinctiveness, ethnic loyalty, or racial pride. Haitiano-Cubano folkloric groups function as “cultural ambassadors” to both international and Cuban publics. On a local level, their participation in concerts and festivals underscores their right to inclusion in the national imaginary and the value of *oriente*’s legacy of Caribbean migration and does so under their own terms, embracing both the spectacular and spiritual.

Each time I sat down to discuss Cuba's racial and ethnic milieus with anthropologists and ethnomusicologists in Cuba, my colleagues contended that North American ethnographers always seemed to be looking for "resistance."<sup>122</sup> What about inclusion and unity, they asked me? Couldn't love for nation or dedication to a utopian project underlie the expression of local subjectivities? Despite decades of deprivations and difficulties under the Castro-led regimes, many believed in the promise of a better society and the viable existence of alternatives to capitalism. Perhaps, said my colleagues, beyond fulfilling needs for creativity and festivity, *haitiano-cubano* folkloric dance and music companies epitomize a positive, state-supported endeavor to insert diverse voices into the national imaginary. While the Rasta communities studied by Hansing exemplify the use of music and spirituality to indirectly critique racism in Cuba, *haitiano-cubano* music, dance, and religion may present a different valence.

In her essay "The Romance of Resistance," anthropologist Lisa Abu-Lughod cautions scholars against the tendency to "romanticize resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" and warns us that by fixating on resistance, we may "collapse distinctions between forms of resistance and...the ways in which intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together these days in communities that are gradually becoming more tied to multiple and often nonlocal systems" (1990:41-42). Abu-Lughod underscores the complexity of social and political actors who may creatively resist authority by dramatizing their independence and distinctiveness yet simultaneously profess faith in those same ruling structures. Through the medium of dance, music, and religion, *haitiano-cubanos* express an unruly and spectacular distinctiveness. Yet they are also some of the most loyal to the

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<sup>122</sup> My thanks to ethnographer Carlos Lloga Domínguez from the Casa del Caribe and musicologist Heidy Cepero Recorder from Instituto Superior de Arte, among others, for fruitful conversations on the topic.

Castro government and appreciative of the Revolution. Many believe in the message of an alternative to capitalism and espouse communitarian values such civic volunteerism, while still relying heavily on their own local networks. The voices in this chapter reveal how Cubans of Haitian descent both support and push against authority, their perspectives on the revolutionary project, and some of the benefits of aligning with an ethnic identity in Cuba today. Either way, *haitiano-cubanos* use performance arts and acts of spiritual mysticism to transmute their maligned ethnicity into a source of celebrity, vigor, and self-determination. As such, performance and religion are zones of potency and pride, so another way to formulate these questions is to ask: Is this potency and pride a form of autonomy and resistance, an example of integration and love of country, or even both? Are Cubans of Haitian descent confirming and celebrating their inclusion and citizenship, although perhaps via an inclusion enacted on their own terms?

Ethnomusicologist Cepero Recoder found that members of the *haitiano-cubano* dance company Caidije named factors including artistic gratification, ties of consanguinity, religious motivations, expression of local spirit and zeal, and opportunities for travel as impetus for joining the troupe (2012:22). In conversations with Antonio, whose story appears below, and other young, urban members of the folkloric troupes with which he worked, I discovered that music and dance companies seemed to offer a space in which to pursue a passion and achieve success that, while part of the state apparatus, was also to some degree outside of the state's credo. He and other dancers and drummers eagerly read any books they could find about Africa, and studied ethnographic and political treatises about the Caribbean, consuming writers such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and CLR James. For Antonio, it was a given that pan-African consciousness and racial pride played a role in *haitiano-cubano* identification and public

performance, a perspective I found more typically expressed by younger members of companies. For them, while the apparatus of the state offered them the opportunity to become folkloric performers, many linked their interest in their heritage with Africa, transcendent drumming, ritual potency, Vodú, and philosophies from the Caribbean's first independent black republic.

For some Cubans of Haitian descent, particularly young urbanites, expressing black ethnic identities may be part of a pull to unmask the state's unfulfilled promise of racial equality, much like the Rasta communities described by Hansing. Other *haitiano-cubanos* feel that decades of socialist leadership have improved their own and their children's prospects, even if they may agree that they are still poor and that scarcities and difficulties complicate daily life. Along with the positive outlooks recounted in this section by Hilario, Elena, Mirta, Julio, and Matiti, I also had conversations with people who were disaffected, alienated, and cynical. Racial consciousness tended to be expressed differently in generational terms, with those who remembered childhoods before the Revolution describing their pride in being Haitian as a way to be Cuban, and those who grew up under the revolutionary project explaining that more people of color, particularly Haitians, the most marginalized, needed to publicly show pride in their roots. Antonio shared with me on several occasions his enthusiasm at seeing people of Haitian descent becoming ethnographers, event producers, and culture bureaucrats.

Whatever degree of resistance they exemplify, performance groups mediate—create junctions and exchanges—between Haitian descendants, other Cubans, the apparatus of the Cuban state, and international audiences.<sup>123</sup> Cubans of Haitian ancestry draw on their customs to generate both respect and resources, using music and dance groups as a vehicle for keeping ethnic traditions alive. A variety of personal, social, and economic benefits are linked with

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<sup>123</sup> My thanks to historian Matthew Casey for valuable comments concerning *haitiano-cubanos'* changing relationship to the public sphere.

participation in Cuba's circuits of arts and performance. I found that elements outside the resistance/inclusion dichotomy, such as personal pleasure, artistic delight, and community pride, were important determinants in sustaining a folkloric company. Other benefits include potential contact with hard-currency carrying foreigners intrigued by the island's music and dance traditions, and touring and recording prospects. Also, many Cubans believe that ties to a foreign nationality facilitate opportunities for dual citizenship. These powerful incentives to participate in the valorization of *haitiano-cubano* culture also serve to facilitate its survival.

#### Antonio's Story: Generational Relationships to Religion and to the Revolution

Antonio grew up with two sisters and their single mom in a poor neighborhood in Santiago de Cuba. The family ate decently because his mother was in charge of the kitchen at the train station that restocked food on cross-country train runs, so they had access to extra food when workers were sent home with overstock and leftovers. As a child, he and his mother and sisters used to visit his grandfather in the town of Mella, in the subdivision named "Zone 14," a cane growing area that was home to a number of Haitians and their descendants. Antonio's Haitian-born grandfather, Cresencio, spoke Haitian Creole, and his children also spoke it with varying degrees of fluency. The grandchildren, however, were never taught the language. Antonio's grandfather wanted future generations to integrate into Cuban society. Haitians were discriminated against, and he believed that speaking Haitian Creole would only mark his grandchildren as outsiders. Antonio explains, "My grandfather told his children not to pass the language on to the next generation. At the time—this was the 1970s, the 1980s—we called it *patuá francés* but today it is known as Haitian Creole. He felt that many Cubans still had a bad opinion of Haitians, so he wanted us to Cubanize." Antonio continues, "My grandfather used to



sit and chat with the other Haitians; his closest friend was named Ti Julian and they would tell stories as they wove hats and baskets, or made halters and tack for animals. We boys would sit and watch.” After coming back from summer vacation visits to his grandfather, says Antonio, “I’d pester my mother, asking her the meanings of words and phrases I heard in Mella. She always said she didn’t know, even though she did.”<sup>124</sup>

Antonio’s family, although poor, was upwardly mobile. His mother’s job at the train station was steady and respectable. She was a card-carrying member of the Communist party and proud of it. Around her children, she modeled being an atheist and a good communist. She participated in activities like her neighborhood watch and the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. Unlike many employees, she didn’t filch from her workplace. Even when goods such as home repair supplies or roofing materials were not available through other channels, she refused to take advantage of the black market, resolute in her belief in the system’s promise to provide for its citizens. But Antonio would find her quietly making gestures, or covertly keeping small amulets and observing habits such as lighting a candle on a particular day of the week. As an adult, he realized that all along his mother had been observing rituals and making libations to the spirits, despite her professed atheism. Antonio’s grandfather also served the spirits. He and other Haitians in Mella Zone 14 sponsored rituals for the Haitian Vodú deities. Antonio’s mother assisted her father, but, says Antonio, “We children were never invited. I grew up hearing the adults speak Haitian Creole among themselves, but they always spoke to us in Spanish. I knew they tended their spirits, but they didn’t bring us along to ceremonies.”

The generation consisting of Antonio’s mother and aunts focused on bettering their futures through education, and, no longer content to labor in agriculture, they moved to cities in pursuit of work. Only Antonio’s uncle, who inherited the family home and garden plot, stayed in

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<sup>124</sup> Antonio Mejias Limonta, interviewed on September 24, 2011, January 23, 2012 and July 5, 2013.

Mella. Many families of Haitian heritage strove to leave the cane fields behind, particularly after the 1959 revolution, when literacy programs and educational opportunities expanded in rural areas. Distancing themselves from customs tagging them as Haitian was for many a part of upward mobility and integration into a wider society. For Cresencio and his family, Vodú was a private matter, veiled to avoid discrimination. While some families maintained Haitian language, songs, and music, spiritual, or culinary traditions, others shunned their parents' and grandparents' legacies and were absorbed into the general Afro-Cuban population over one or more generations.

Antonio's story, however, illustrates a desire to recover and validate Haitian heritage that I believe is on the rise in Cuba. When he was sixteen, while ambling down a thoroughfare near his home, Antonio heard live drumming pouring from a building. It turned out to be a folkloric group rehearsing in a cultural center. Antonio explained to me that he was used to hearing the sounds of rumba, *chachacha*, *son* and other Cuban rhythms, and that he had also seen many folkloric groups perform choreographies based on the sacred musics and rituals of Santería and Regla de Congo. But this sound was something different, and it "called to him." He wandered inside and found José Gabriel "Graviel" Spret, an expert on Haitian music and dance, conducting a rehearsal for a troupe called Obarra Meiji. Graviel had originally been recruited by Toni Pérez, the artistic director of the Santiago-based professional troupe Ballet Folklórico de Oriente, to move from Las Tunas to Santiago to work as the troupe's specialist in Haitian repertoire. Over time, Graviel had begun to assist various local amateur groups to expand their range to include *haitiano-cubano* material as well. He explained to Antonio that what he was hearing were rhythms brought to Cuba from Haiti.

Antonio fell in love with Haitian music and became involved in performing this repertoire

in various folkloric groups, first joining Obarra Meiji, later playing percussion and dancing in another named Aburre Eyé. Although both groups feature *lucumi* names, signaling their connection with Santería or neo-Yoruba traditions on the island, each attempts to cover a spectrum of Cuban folklore including rumba numbers, *son*, and Carnival *congas*, as well as dances representing movements attributed to the *orishas*, or Santería deities. Including choreographies representing eastern Cuba's Haitian legacy became an expected part of the repertoire of folkloric groups in eastern Cuba during the 1990s. Besides working as an *acesor técnico*, or consultant, to both professional and aficionado troupes in Santiago, Graviel had his own group that specialized in Haitian material: Los Misterios de Vodú. Antonio integrated into the company as a young man in 1996 and performed with them until the group left Santiago and relocated to Havana in search of wider exposure in 2005. Antonio explains, "I entered the world of Haitian culture through study of dance and drum. I'm Cuban, but I'm Haitian too, and I couldn't resist the rhythms that called my heart."

While Antonio had contact with *haitiano-cubano* communities during his childhood through his maternal grandfather, he learned neither the language nor the performance arts nor the spiritual customs. But as a restless teenager he stumbled across an access point to his barely registered childhood legacy. Through the vehicle of state-supported folkloric dance and music troupes, he became enamored of Haitian culture, eventually making it his life's work. We met while I was doing preliminary research in Cuba in the mid-2000s. Antonio was in his early thirties, very cognizant of his Haitian heritage, and already a sought-after instrument maker and drummer specializing in Haitian music. More recently, he initiated as an *oungan*, or priest of Vodú. A local cultural institution, the Casa del Caribe, is sponsoring his studies at the University of Oriente to gain degrees in Art History and Caribbean Studies, programs that will qualify him

to work in the culture bureaucracy in jobs such as event promotion and production, and he is on track to become an academic researcher and Casa staff member. Antonio's personal history



Figure 23 – Antonio Mejías Limonta recording a Vodú event – ©Viddal 2009

mirrors the trajectory of Haitian culture in Cuba; traditions have moved from private family or small community environments into the public sphere.

What motivates young people to seek out and study Haitian traditions and feature this heritage as important in their concept of self and identity?

Antonio's story is not unique. Many young Afro-Cubans, including those of Jamaican extraction, have begun to explore their "hyphenated heritage," but this trend is particularly strong among Cubans of Haitian descent. As we saw in Chapter Three, this is evidenced by the emerging festivals and arts projects dedicated to valorizing Haitian traditions and the

growing number of folkloric groups specializing in a *haitiano-cubano* repertoire. Even though "Haitian" was once a negative term referring to a denigrated and maligned group in Cuba, people of Haitian descent are parleying their heritage into a source of respect and opportunity. Antonio and his family exemplify a shift, accelerating since the post-Soviet period, in the relationship between the state, ethnic minorities, and spiritual traditions in Cuba. Although his mother worshipped surreptitiously while outwardly adopting a solid socialist identity, Antonio has embraced Vodú publicly, and he rediscovered it via an officially approved folkloric group. In performance, the Haitian community is able to use their ethnic "otherness" to attract state

support. But many do this on their own terms, carving a niche for themselves within the revolutionary project, yet outside its official atheist doctrine.

### Passports to Prosperity: Art and Performance as a Means of Economic Mobility

In Cuba, arts can be a path to a steady income. Being an artist is not seen as a shaky occupation because professional musicians, dancers, singers, and choreographers are salaried by the state. There are systems by which performers classed as *aficionados* (“enthusiasts”) or *portadores* (“heritage performers”) may ascend to professional salaried status. Working as a performer in Cuba has appealing perks, including potential contact with foreigners and the tourist industry, and access to hard currency in the form of tips, gifts, or remuneration for services such as instruction in dance or music. Amateur groups, while they don’t have fixed salaries, may generate income by selling bootleg CDs or craft items to tourists who watch performances, or offering private classes in percussion or dance to impressed spectators.

A Haitian-Cuban folkloric troupe from even a tiny village may be invited to folk festivals in the provincial capital, or can dream of being “discovered” by a foreign promoter and gaining the ultimate prize: travel abroad. For Cubans, a trip outside the country is seen as an immediate ticket to a better life. Even acquiring just a few hundred dollars can change a family’s situation. Despite the challenges of navigating state regulation of income-generating activities, micro-commerce is a manifest objective. Money to buy a sewing machine allows for the start of a small tailoring enterprise. A little cash to invest in a corral and shed for pigs or goats creates food security and income as livestock reproduce. Although accessing construction supplies can be challenging, enlarging homes is an abiding pursuit in a country of endemic housing shortages where generations may live in rooms sub-divided only by a curtain. Families quest for and hoard

cement and cinder block in order to put an addition on the family home, perhaps allowing an adult child the dignity of their own bedroom. All Cubans assume they will make money when traveling. Within the prominent “economy of the arts,” artists and performers (likewise sports stars) credibly dream of invitations and permission to travel outside the country.

On an island isolated by a controversial regime, a sense of exceptionalism—the conviction that Cuba is categorically different from anywhere else—tends to permeate notions of what is possible at home versus abroad. Cubans are generally proud of their educational system, pointing specifically to the preponderance of residents with advanced degrees. They imagine that with Cuban training and education, the inventiveness born of dealing with decades of shortages, and a scrappy disposition, they will be successful abroad, confidently assuming that foreign travel will result in financial achievement. I was surprised by the number of *haitiano-cubanos* with whom I chatted during festivals and events who assumed that any foreign passport, including a Haitian passport, would make them eligible to enter the United States or Europe.

These beliefs have likely been fueled by a recent Spanish law initiated in 2007, the “Ley 52/2007” known as the “Ley de Memoria Histórica” (Law of Historical Memory), which made hundreds of thousands of persons of Spanish descent worldwide potentially eligible for Spanish citizenship. Those who could prove that a Spanish parent or grandparent lived in “exile” for political or economic reasons resulting from the Spanish Civil War or the Franco dictatorship could apply for citizenship during a three-year period that ended on December 27, 2011.

According to reports and debates on the law published in the BBC News, the New York Times, and the Spanish daily *El País*, particularly large groups of applicants were expected from Cuba, Argentina, and Mexico.<sup>125</sup> Many Cubans with a Spanish grandparent engaged in the mad dash to

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<sup>125</sup> See for example: “España suma casi 250.000 nuevos nacionales gracias a la ‘ley de nietos,’” *El País*, March 30, 2012; “46.000 hijos y nietos de exiliados buscan en México ser españoles,” *El País*, 27 March 2012; “Spanish

claim their Spanish passports before time ran out. Despite a gamut of forms and fees and an overwhelmed Spanish embassy in Havana, tens of thousands of Cuban applications for Spanish citizenship have been processed. An advantage of holding a Spanish passport includes access to work opportunities within the European Union and the ability to travel without a visa to many first world countries including the United States.” Once having legally entered the United States, Cubans can claim asylum in order to remain and may apply for residency under the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, a Cold-War era law promulgated to allow simplified entry for those fleeing the Castro regime.<sup>126</sup> While I lived in Santiago de Cuba during the spring of 2010, the streets hummed with conversation about application fees and arranging trips to the Spanish embassy in Havana. Friends and acquaintances, from motorcycle taxi drivers to university professors, pulled paperwork from drawers and cabinets to show me carefully filled-out forms and squirreled funds to purchase the necessary stamps and seals. I found that Afro-Cubans lacking verifiable recent Spanish ancestors nevertheless talked about possibilities of cashing in on similar opportunities. The Jamaican government offers citizenship to those who can prove a Jamaican grandparent or great-grandparent.<sup>127</sup> An engineer friend mused about job opportunities in Jamaica as his wife pursued the documents necessary to show that she is a direct descendent of migrants from the island.

Dr. Jean Maxius Bernard, the Cultural Attaché at the Haitian embassy in Havana, remarked to me that staff at the embassy receive ever more requests for travel to Haiti by

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exiles’ Latin America families in passport rush,” *BBC News Europe*, December 28, 2011; “Cuban crowds long to be Spanish,” *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, February 19, 2009; “Hundreds of Cubans to apply for Spanish citizenship,” *The Telegraph*, December 29, 2008; “Spain Offers Citizenship to Exiles’ Kin,” *New York Times*, December 28, 2008.

<sup>126</sup> For details, see the US Department of State Fact Sheet devoted to the Cuban Adjustment Act: [http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/cuba/cuba\\_adjustment\\_act.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/cuba/cuba_adjustment_act.html).

<sup>127</sup> See the Jamaican government website “Jamaica Information Service” for details: <http://www.jis.gov.jm/faq/applying-for-jamaican-citizenship>.

descendants, particularly from those who can prove a Haitian parent or grandparent, because this category is eligible for a tourist visa, thus avoiding the need for a letter of invitation.<sup>128</sup> As well as a way to connect with relatives or enjoy the culture, a trip to Haiti can be an economic strategy. As mentioned in Chapter Three, some Cubans who travel to Haiti buy goods—such as clothing, perfume, or watches available more cheaply and in greater variety in Haiti’s markets—to resell at home. For Cubans, foreign travel is presumed to result in financial gain, and ethnic links to other countries are plumbed for possibilities. Additionally, performers and artists exemplify an occupational category associated with the possibility of engagements abroad.

#### The Creole Choir of Cuba: Embracing Haitian Culture, Creating International Success

Grupo Vocal Desandann, which tours abroad under the name Creole Choir of Cuba, is the country’s most successful *haitiano-cubano* performance group. The choir is composed of ten members and hails from Camagüey, Cuba’s third largest city, sometimes called the “gateway to Oriente” because of its placement at the border of the eastern third of the island. The choir was founded in 1994. Emilia Díaz Chávez, director since its inception, explains, “We were all members of the Choir of Camagüey, a professional choir, which I directed for thirty-three years. One day, we realized that a number of us were of Haitian heritage...so we decided to start a choir dedicated specifically to a repertoire of Haitian songs. We started this to, as we say, ‘settle our debt to our ancestors,’ because Cubans were...unaware of the artistic and spiritual potential existing in Haiti.”<sup>129</sup>

Díaz Chávez explained that members of the Creole Choir of Cuba span three generations

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<sup>128</sup> Conversation April 17, 2010.

<sup>129</sup> All quotes from Díaz Chávez are from an interview conducted on October 11, 2011, in Hadley, Massachusetts. Translations are mine.



of descent from Haitian migrants. First generation members speak Haitian Creole, but the great-grandchildren understand very little of the language, although some are studying it. She continued, “We gave ourselves the task to promote, to disseminate, and to show the beauty of Haitian culture. Because unfortunately, Haiti is always talked about only as the ‘poorest country in the world,’ it’s like a slogan...” (2011). While Díaz Chávez still sings with the Choir of Camagüey, the Creole Choir of Cuba is a more commercially successful group. It has toured widely, including in Europe, Latin America, and New Zealand. Real World Records, a UK label, produced their newest recording, “Tande-la” (“Listen”) and during a promotional tour in the United States in October 2011, I interviewed Díaz Chávez at the Howard Johnson Hotel in Hadley, Massachusetts. It was the group’s fifth trip to the US.

Members of the Creole Choir of Cuba are graduates of music schools, some, including Díaz Chávez, from the Escuela Nacional de Arte in Havana. Others attended “Ignacio Cervantes Schools,” which are learning institutes created for adults already working as performers who want to acquire skills such as reading musical notation and understanding music theory in order to improve their professional ranking.<sup>130</sup>

I asked Díaz Chávez how members’ families came to Cuba, and she noted that all are descendants of the cane cutters who came in the twentieth century. None, as far as members are aware, are from the much earlier and smaller wave of people who fled the turmoil of the Haitian Revolution, as erroneously suggested in some of the group’s promotional material, and the choir

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<sup>130</sup> Díaz Chávez graduated from ENA in 1978 with a specialty in choral direction and later worked as a music teacher at various levels, as well as singing with the Choir of Camagüey. Members of the Creole Choir of Cuba are all trained in varied repertoires including Renaissance, baroque, classical, and contemporary music. Díaz Chávez’ cites Caribbean and Cuban musical sources and North American Black spirituals as musical influences on the style in which the Creole Choir arranges and interprets their Haitian folk song repertoire.

does not perform any songs linked with *Tumba Francesa*.<sup>131</sup> Díaz Chavez remarks, “You can’t tell from my last name that I’m Haitian, because my surnames are Spanish. That too, has a history, a sad history. Among the many discriminations Haitians were subjected to in Cuba was the loss of our names” (2011). She explains that many migrants were simply assigned the surnames of the owners of the sugar plantations where they worked, or Hispanicized versions of their own family names. Others were given denigrating or absurd last names as a form of mockery to make Cubans laugh, such as “Luis Sin Pie” (“Sin Pie” means “Without Feet” in Spanish) instead of Louis Saint-Pierre. In the case of her name, says Díaz Chávez, Chávez was probably “Charles.” After a generation or two, many original names were lost to memory and a thread of connection to family in Haiti was cut.

Díaz Chávez explains that *haitiano-cubanos* are not as homogenous as many may think. For example, most of the Haitians who came to Cuba in the early twentieth century to cut sugar cane were from rural backgrounds and often not literate. But, well-to-do merchants and traders also re-settled in Cuba. She mentions that a member of the choir, Marina Fernandes, began to search for relatives during the choir’s trips to Haiti and met members of two different branches of her family, one branch very poor, the other affluent Haitians of Arab origin, living in Petionville, Port-au-Prince’s elite suburb.

Díaz Chávez told me the story of how the choir began to tour abroad. In 1997, a group of cultural promoters came to Cuba looking for new “world music” talent to record. The singers threw themselves on the highway for Havana and were able to gain the attention of the

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<sup>131</sup> *Tumba Francesa* is the signature genre of music and dance associated with the slaves of French planters who abandoned the colony of Saint-Domingue for Cuba around the end of the eighteenth century.

impresarios by doing an impromptu performance in the hallway of the Institute of Music.

Impressed, the promoters later chose them for a US tour.<sup>132</sup>

The Creole Choir of Cuba has traveled to Haiti numerous times, both before and after the earthquake, when they were part of humanitarian delegations from Cuba providing entertainment in tent camps and orphanages. Díaz Chávez explains that “the first time we went to Haiti, we saw many things, some of us found family members, but we didn’t have time to study. So we asked Cuba’s Minister of Culture for help. With the support of the Ministry, we spent fifteen days at ENART [the Ecole National des Arts, Haiti’s national school of art], in Port au Prince” (2011). The choir took dance classes and studied rhythms and songs.<sup>133</sup> Says Díaz Chávez, “Wow, it was great, but it was really for professional dancers, and we are just regular people when it comes to dance, so we were tired! We want to go back and study more, but well, with the earthquake, everything in Haiti was thrown back 100 years; so much has been destroyed...” (2011). When I remarked that in Cuba the state is ever-present but in Haiti it is absent, Díaz Chávez replied, “Yes. In Cuba, you may have to eat things you don’t prefer, don’t like, but nobody dies of hunger. No Cuban would permit this. If we die of infirmities, it’s not because there was no health care. We have problems, but we have infrastructure. When it’s found that there is corruption, people are booted... In Haiti, there is not the same control” (2011).

Cubans of Haitian descent express their Haitian-ness in different ways. Díaz Chávez explains that while the repertoire of the choir includes many songs linked to Vodú, she herself

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<sup>132</sup> The promoters included the MultiArts Projects & Productions’ (today MAPP International Productions) director Ann Rosenthal, who sponsored this first tour. Later, they toured with Canadian jazzist Jane Bunnett and were featured in her documentary “Spirits of Havana” (2000).

<sup>133</sup> A particularly enchanting feature of Creole Choir’s performances are the dance choreographies that accompany many of the songs. The choir performs Yanvalu with serpentine torso movements differently from other *haitiano-cubano* performance companies in Cuba, because they learned this dance from professional performers in Haiti. Although some individuals in other folkloric groups have visited Haiti, the Creole Choir is the only Cuban company that has collected a significant body of new material in Haiti and incorporated it into their repertoire.

does not practice it, “Let me tell you something about us. None of us practice Vodú. The majority of us are Baptists. People don’t know this. In my family, we had everything. My father was a *santero*, that is to say, an *oungan*. I have been to *fiestas del santo*, and in the choir we sing many Vodú songs because Vodú is the soul of the Haitian people. But, personally, most of us are Baptists” (2011). Vásquez Lemes’ study of the Haitian community in Camagüey notes that significant numbers of Haitians and their descendants in that city are today Baptists, Adventist, or Pentecostal (2009). While members of the Creole Choir are proud of their Haitian heritage and in fact include and feature Vodú chants in the context of folk songs in their repertoire, their goals evince a “politics of respectability” (Monson 2007) as they strive to educate fans about the merit of *haitiano-cubano* art forms and break stereotypes. While they respect their rural roots and the Vodú beliefs associated with Haitians in Cuba, Díaz Chávez is at pains to share that the Creole Choir is racially diverse, highly educated, and Christian.



Figure 24 – Researchers Vásquez Lemes (far left), Viddal (middle front), and Mejías Limonta (tallest, back row) smile for the camera with the Creole Choir after a rehearsal in Camagüey – photo courtesy of Cepero Recorder 2013

## Ethnicity as Resource

The popularity of folkloric musical and dance groups among those of Haitian descent in Cuba is growing, both in small towns and villages in the eastern provinces and in cities. While acknowledging prestige, meaningful leisure activity, and spiritual satisfaction as factors in choosing to pursue activities and art forms associated with an ethnic identity, it is essential to note economic necessity. Few arenas exist for augmenting financial resources in Cuba, particularly for black Cubans, perhaps living in a small town in Santiago province without relatives in Miami who send remittances or are able to furnish the capital to help launch a business in one of the newly permissible categories of self-employment. Eckstein argues that access to remittances is heavily race-based, and also regional, because the Cuban diaspora is predominately white and urban. She points out that, because rural blacks were the most disadvantaged group in prerevolutionary Cuba and benefitted significantly from the reforms initiated under Castro, they were less likely to emigrate. While the racial profile of Cuban migrants shifted over the decades as economic motivations to leave the island escalated with the Special Period, as recently as the late 1990s, 96% of all Cuban émigrés in the United States categorized themselves as white (2004:322-323). Most black, rural Cubans cannot rely on relatives residing in first world countries to assist them financially.

In *Ethnicity, Inc.*, John and Jean Comaroff assert that ethnicity is an expanding frontier of social and financial currency. They describe an expanding global “identity economy” and argue that ethnicity is becoming more commodified and more present than ever in transactions of everyday global life. They contend that in this economy “the ‘ancestral’ appears as a creative source of innovation, a view at odds with conventional understandings of ‘culture’ as ‘heritage’ or ‘custom’” (2009:3). The Comaroffs claim that “cultural tourism...has become a universal

panacea...for those with no work and little to sell.” They also declare that commercializing and staging identity does not inevitably cheapen it, arguing that commodifying an ethnic identity is also a “mode of reflection, of self-construction” (2009:9). Have scholars shied away from exploring the economic dimensions of ethnic identity because they assume that culture, modified for public consumption, loses genuineness or legitimacy? Must tourism devalue the ethnic products it seeks to consume? The Comaroffs posit, “The process of cultural commodification, and the incorporation of identity in which it is imbricated, is less linear, less teleological, more capricious than either classical economics or critical theory might suggest. Neither for consumers nor for producers does the aura of ethno-commodities simply disappear with their entry into the market; sometimes...it may be rediscovered, re-animated, regained” (2009:20). They argue that unlike typical commodities, ethnicity is not “used up” by mass circulation. Actually, marketing may reaffirm and validate ethnic identity.

In considering *haitiano-cubano* identity politics within the global identity economy, and its “market,” particularly its “market” in Cuba, I suggest that what Haitian-Cubans provide is an authentic Cuban-ness that is different from Havana. *Orientales* can feel pride in their region’s multi-ethnic distinctiveness. The Cuban state benefits because *haitaino-cubano* folklore expands the Ministry of Tourism’s arsenal of valuable sights and experiences. We can imagine an ad campaign that declares: “Don’t visit Cuba for just one week, you’ll need two! After Havana, travel to Santiago, Cuba’s steamy ‘second city,’ where you’ll enjoy the region’s unique repertoire of Franco-Haitian music and dance!” Cuba’s Haitian ethnic minority also provides the state with a point of connection to the francophone Antilles and ties Cuba to zones and projects of Caribbean identity, ranging from political ventures such as CARICOM to arts festivals and cultural events.

I suggest that in performing their ethnicity in folkloric music and dance groups, *haitiano-cubanos* mobilize pride and make choices about what aspects of their heritage to share, keep private, accentuate, or underplay, creating spaces of agency and self-reflection, as we shall see in the next chapter. Significantly, they also provide a vehicle for financial opportunity, particularly for sectors of the population such as descendants of Haitians who are less likely to have expatriate relatives in first world countries who send them remittances.

Castaldi affirms the pull of a career in folkloric performance, particularly for those in economically bleak conditions. She describes the aspirations of young Senegalese, noting, “The youth that comes from the popular classes realistically recognizes the limits of an education in French as a means of mobility ‘upward’ into the middle class, or outward into the international professional world. African Ballets offer them a much more realistic means of escaping the predicament of poverty.” She argues that ethnicity and heritage, “far from representing an introverted world, becomes a source of integration into an international network of recognition and migration” (2006:204). In the next section, we meet a man who has embodied that description thoroughly.

#### *Oungan* Pablo Milanés: Cosmopolitan Rural Authenticity

Unlike the Creole Choir, Pablo Milanés Fuentes, the *oungan* we met in Chapter Two, is deeply involved in all aspects of Vodú. In many ways, he fits the stereotype of a *haitiano-cubano*. He lives deep in the mountains, grows coffee, oversees a lively trade in goats, and rides his horse to town. Until recently his house didn’t have electricity, and running water and indoor plumbing were still in the works. But while he may be a denizen of a traditional rural life, he is also worldly, well-traveled, and economically diversified. An outdoor thatched-roof waiting

room fills up on the weekends, as clients in search of healing and guidance arrive for private consultations. Several times a year, he hosts large spirit parties, attended variously by neighbors, people of Haitian descent from as far away as the capital, rural Communist Party representatives, anthropologists, and documentary film makers. His folkloric dance troupe is active on the festival circuit.

As an associate of the Santiago-based research institution the Casa del Caribe, Pablo Milanés is often asked to act as a spokesperson for the *haitiano-cubano* communities of Cuba, and as such, he has been invited to academic conferences, music festivals, and solidarity events. For example, he was asked to offer a prayer for those who passed away during the Haitian earthquake at a memorial sponsored by provincial officials and the Haitian medical students' organization in Santiago. Pablo and his brother Tato (also an *oungan*) have traveled to Haiti as invitees of various cultural organizations, and Pablo danced with then-President Préval's wife at a palace event after touring the island with intellectuals and cultural activists and attending a Vodou pilgrimage.<sup>134</sup> He reminisces, "I felt really good in Haiti. It helps that I know the language, at least a good bit (smiles). People were cultured, we saw an elegance, a respect. My brother and I were sitting near the street, in front of the Martha Jean Claude Foundation, and every person who passed us greeted us, with 'bonjour' and 'bonjour,' even children."<sup>135</sup> Pablo enjoys a level of autonomy from the Cuban state unusual for a rural farmer. His prosperous grange, busy healing practice, and role as a public figure allow him to be both a part of the state cultural apparatus and relatively self-sufficient and independent, in spheres both spiritual and economic.

The enthusiastic fans, clients, and spiritual godchildren, the intellectual and artistic circles

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<sup>134</sup> Interview March 14, 2009.

<sup>135</sup> Interview March 14, 2009. Translations mine.



of friends, and their international travel schedules mark the Creole Choir of Cuba and the Milanés brothers as elites of the *haitiano-cubano* community of Cuba. Because their charisma and expertise earn them respect both at home and abroad, their compatriots in the *haitiano-cubano* community see them as successful stereotype-breakers and models of the valorization of formerly denigrated traditions and customs, expanding what it means to claim Haitian identity in Cuba.

### Respectability, Race, and the Spectacular

Haitiano-cubano performances themselves create repositories of pride, not only for performers, but also for the culture they represent. They often overlap polished, educated self-representations with untamed and unruly sensibilities. Ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson uses the term “politics of respectability” to clarify a balancing of “high” and “low” culture codes (2007:95).<sup>136</sup> Describing the Modern Jazz Quartet’s performances during the era of the struggle for civil rights in the United States, Monson explains that the group strove to depict jazz as not just a music of nightclubs, but as a classical art form worthy of the concert hall. Monson suggests that in “a social climate that associated jazz musicians with heroin addiction and dissoluteness, the MJQ confronted white audiences in the United States and Europe with a conservative black masculinity that they seldom realized existed,” but avows that the group performed “unarguably swinging” music (2007:96).

Likewise, Haitian-Cuban folkloric groups showcase their expertise and high standards, proving to audiences within and beyond their community that they too are trained in performance and carry themselves with professionalism. Costumes and well-rehearsed choreographies

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<sup>136</sup> The term “politics of respectability” was coined by historian Evelyn Higginbotham, see *Righteous Discontent* (1994).

demonstrate that their traditions belong not just on the village common or in ethnic enclaves, but also in front of national and international audiences. In a society that associated Haitians with witchcraft, primitiveness, disease, and pre-modern practices, *haitiano-cubano* performers confront audiences with a trained and serious style that puts them on a footing with “high culture.” For example, the Creole Choir of Cuba, as discussed earlier, take great care to present themselves as the epitome of educated, gracious professionalism. Every gesture and movement is polished; and vocals are superb.



Figure 25 – The Creole Choir performing in Havana – ©Viddal 2009

On the other hand, many *haitiano-cubano* companies also showcase feats of daring during performances, and delight in flaunting an unruly and spectacular style. Members of Pablo Milanés Fuentes’ troupe from Pilon del Cauto tread across upturned machete blades. Dancers in Julio Garcia Lay’s company Grupo La Caridad pass lit torches over their arms and legs, and include a spectacle during which a blindfolded performer lies stock still with a glass bottle on his belly which a compatriot dramatically shatters with one stroke of a machete. Although

representing professionalism and artistic expertise, *haitiano-cubano* folklore also epitomizes unruliness, toughness, and potency. Playing with fire, lifting and balancing heavy objects, and other acts of coordination, skill, and chutzpah are part of the repertoire of most of the groups. In Chapter Five we will explore in more depth the dichotomy between spectacular and fearsome versus gracious and refined found within *haitian-cubano* spirituality and performance. While performing their right to inclusion in the Cuban national mix, people of Haitian heritage in Cuba highlight their independent streak. In the context of communist utopianism, many create theurgist performances featuring feats of mysticism and magic.



Figure 26 – Grupo Folclórico La Caridad performing feats with machete – ©Viddal 2010

## Conclusion

*Haitiano-cubanos* are not politically, socially, or religiously homogenous. Some are very loyal to the current regime and staunch believers in the mission of radical socialist equality; others are restive or skeptical. They may be urban or rural, Baptists or *vodúistas*. As members of government-sponsored folkloric performance groups, they can be reliable envoys representing the unity of the state while simultaneously articulating spaces of religiosity and autonomy. This chapter has presented the experiences of diverse Cubans of Haitian heritage who publicly perform their Haitian identity, including Antonio Mejias Limonta, Emilia Díaz Chávez, and Pablo Milanés Fuentes. As *haitiano-cubanos* increasingly take the reins of forming and promoting their cultural customs, ethnicity can become, as the Comaroffs suggest, “an independent variable with the capacity to shape choices, life chances, and social processes” (2009: 39).

Antonio, striving to re-connect with his Haitian roots, typifies a generation of young, urban Afro-Cubans of Haitian heritage who no longer have living relatives who were born in Haiti and whose families have assimilated into Cuban society. When, as a ‘city kid’ from a working-class barrio in Santiago de Cuba, he first heard Haitian rhythms, he “couldn’t tear himself away.” After more than a decade of studying and playing *haitiano-cubano* music in both performance groups and at religious events, he initiated as an *oungan*, or Vodú ritual specialist. Antonio identifies as something “in addition” to Afro-Cuban, and his path was instigated and motivated by exposure to cultural traditions via performing arts groups. Today, he travels across the island to attend rituals, has started writing a book about the regional variation in Vodú practices in Cuba, and hopes to visit Haiti in the future to conduct comparative research.

Emilia Díaz Chávez, the director of the successful Creole Choir of Cuba, cherishes Vodú

folksongs and delights in bringing them to publics around the world. The choir has traveled to Haiti to learn sacred dances and see ceremonies and rituals. While Emilia believes that the arts of Vodú are Haitian cultural treasures, her own religious devotions follow a different path and she is part of a growing community of Protestants in Cuba.<sup>137</sup>

*Oungan* Pablo Milanés' thriving consulting practice offers clients means to address their worries and troubles in a context poles apart from official Marxist ideology. His many spiritual godchildren in Cuba and abroad form a network apart from the saturating state officialdom of Cuban daily life. Yet, government organizations call upon him, as a warden of Haitian customs, to represent the breadth of Cuba's multi-ethnic heritage on formal occasions both at home and overseas.

An ethnic bond, involvement with performance troupes, or a spiritual community can provide not only artistic satisfaction and collective pride, but also opportunities to improve economic circumstances. These alliances or "hyphenated identities" open doors to new resources, providing spaces of recreation and pleasure, and simultaneously inclusion and distinction. In twenty-first century Cuba, *haitiano-cubanos* parlay their denigrated ethnicity into an asset, mobilizing it as a resource of dignity, autonomy, and artistic, economic and spiritual satisfaction.

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<sup>137</sup> For more on contemporary Protestant churches in Cuba see Theron (2007) and Perera Pintado (2005).

## Chapter Five – The Ferocious and the Gracious

### *A Petró Party*

I had just arrived in Santiago de Cuba to begin my first year of fieldwork. Although I had been traveling to the island for a decade, my previous trips had been short, and I wasn't yet inured to the intense midsummer heat, heavy humidity, and dazzling sun as I trudged up and down the hilly streets of Santiago, looking for a place called *la loma del caballo* ("horse ridge"). It was July 6, 2008. Santiago's biggest cultural festival was underway, and the program included an open-to-the-public Vodú ritual in an outlying neighborhood. While I had seen various African-inspired Cuban spiritual practices over the years, hitherto I'd been to few Cuban Vodú rituals, so I was excited to see what would take place. The brothers Pablo and Tato Milanés, well-known *oungans*, or priests of Vodú, were going to host this public *fet luá*, or ritual festivity for the Vodú spirits.

Each year in July, the Casa del Caribe, a cultural research institution located in Santiago de Cuba, sponsors the Festival del Caribe, a ten-day event that includes performances, concerts, parades, art exhibitions, and an academic conference. The Casa's mission is twofold, to conduct research, and to promote and exhibit "traditional popular culture." Stages are set up around the city, parades are organized, and conference centers are booked for panels and lectures. The Festival also includes demonstrations of Cuba's African-inspired spiritual practices, hosted by recognized ritual specialists.

Four rituals are presented during each Festival. A local Santería priestess honors the ocean deity Yemaya at a nearby beach with a sacrament releasing wreaths of flowers, perfume, and other offerings into the sea, a Palo temple hosts a nighttime drumming fete, and a Spiritist

congregation sings and chants in the outdoor plaza of a theater. The fourth event spotlights the region's Haitian descendants and is customarily hosted by a rural Vodú ritual specialist who has traveled down from the mountains for the festival. Often officiating are Pablo and Tato Milanés from a Pílon del Cauto, a hamlet near the river Cauto in the Sierra Maestra mountains. Since they have relatives in the Chicharrones neighborhood, the event is typically held there, because the family can collect and ready the fowl, goats, pig and other offerings ahead of time. The Casa del Caribe's budget includes funds for these sacrifices and bus transportation for Pablo's dance troupe and drummers to the event.

There were no visible street signs marking the steep gravel roads, but when I began to hear drumming I knew I was close. Huffing up a rise, I saw a crowd gathering in a dirt courtyard between houses atop the next slope and knew I'd found *la loma del caballo*, located in Chicharrones, a working class neighborhood on the southwestern edge of the city. The yard was packed with over a hundred participants and spectators, with people at the back of the throng craning to see. Those invited included Milanés family members living in Chicharrones, members of Pablo's dance troupe, municipal bureaucrats, anthropologists, the local news media, and the entire neighborhood, as well as any festival-goers who managed to make their way this far from the touristic beaten track.



Figure 27 –Vodú Petró event hosted by Pablo and Tato Milanés for the Festival del Caribe in the Chicharrones neighborhood – ©Viddal 2009

Tato and Pablo were hosting a ritual dedicated to the *petró*, or “hot” Vodú spirits, who are understood to be tempestuous, rough divinities with the qualities of warriors or magicians.<sup>138</sup> They stand as a foil to the *rada*, or “cool” spirits who embody more refined and temperate qualities. The event began with prayers, drumming, and a circular parading of flags and banners, each sewn with an appliqué signifying a *luá*, or deity, or announcing the name of the folkloric company.<sup>139</sup> Food and drink has been readied to entice the spirits to attend and had been set out on banana leaves and plastic trays in the courtyard. It included white rum, mugs of both sweet and bitter coffee, coconut and peanut candies, yucca flatbread, toasted corn, and boiled roots. Animals were readied. Fowl were blessed and “baptized” by a sprinkling them with a sprig of basil dipped in a mixture of holy water and cologne. Goats were similarly baptized, then

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<sup>138</sup> In current Krèyol orthography, *petwo* is utilized, formerly *petro* was more common. In Spanish, the word carries an accent, appearing as *petró*.

<sup>139</sup> Spelled *lwa* in the current Haitian Krèyol orthography and *loa* in the French-style older system, both *luá* and *loa* are seen in Spanish language publications, with *luá* (plural *luases*) somewhat more common.



groomed with a comb, and a red handkerchief was tied around their horns. Red indicates offerings tendered to the “hot” *petró* spirits, whereas white, pink, or light colors would signify offerings presented to the “cool” *rada* spirits. Lit candles were affixed to the goats’ horns to attract the spirits and illuminate their way. Next, the birds and goats were fed some bits of the spirits’ food and drink.<sup>140</sup> A large pig, purchased for the occasion, was tied to a fence, awaiting its sacrificial fate. Only the *verraco*, or uncastrated male pig, was not offered a taste of the spirits’ menu. My friend Antonio Mejias Limonta, an initiated Cuban Vodú priest, later explained that because the *verraco* is destined for “*cosas diabolicas*,” or the most nefarious spiritual affairs, it is not fed together with the other animals. In some cases, the pig is given a little rum, the “hottest” beverage, but it is kept apart and does not partake in the customary feast for all *petró* spirits.



Figure 28 – Members of the Milanés family and Grupo de Pílon del Cauto encourage a young member of the troupe to dance at a public Vodú party in Chicharrones – photo courtesy of Gisela Roeder 2011

<sup>140</sup> Mètraux, detailing Vodou in Haiti, observes that “as soon as the animal has eaten or drunk, it becomes the property of the loa and partakes of his divine nature” (1972:170).

The extended Milanés family, some based in the village of Pílon del Cauto and the nearby town of Palma Soriano, others having come from as far away as Havana, assisted with all the proceedings. Many were members of Pablo's dance and drum troupe, Grupo Folklórico de Pílon del Cauto. Dressed in red costumes accented with blue or black, they sang to welcome the spirits, coaxing them to attend the party in their honor. Soon, spirits begin to arrive, occupying the bodies of Pablo and Tato, and sometimes possessing other senior family members as well.

Throughout Cuba and Haiti and across Vodú, Santería, Palo, and other African-inspired traditions of trance possession, divinities display characteristic personalities, predilections, and behaviors. Each has favorite foods and beverages, penchants (such as Ecili's weakness for perfume or Togo's love of knives), is invited by certain drum rhythms and songs, engages in iconic gestures and behaviors, and likes to be garbed in clothing of particular colors. The arrival of a deity in the body of an adept is usually followed by a costume change. Once experienced ritualists have determined that the possession has taken hold and the deity is truly present, the person mounted by spirit is taken aside and dressed in garments kept ready for the occasion, underscoring the theatrical aspect of ritual. Onlookers often recognize which divine presence has graced proceedings by their costume, for example identifying Ochun at a Santería ceremony by her yellow dress or Vodú's Criminel by his black shirt, even if they are not sufficiently familiar with the details of practice to immediately recognize a spirit by their behavior or via the rhythms being played.

Tato's tutelary spirit, Criminel, is an intense *petró* deity, and is associated with other fierce deities, such as Togo the bull, Gran Buá, and the Ogun family of warriors. Violent, formidable, and capricious, Criminel in Cuban Vodú is regarded as a "diabolical" divinity who

brings tremendous power to proceedings.<sup>141</sup> In Haiti, a common manifestation of Criminel comes in the form of the “baron” or Bawon Kriminel, part of the family of Gede spirits, bawdy and ribald denizens of the cemetery who rule over both death and sexuality.<sup>142</sup> In Cuba, Criminel is regarded as a very “hot” *petró* spirit but is not associated with the cemetery, and my informants were unfamiliar with any associations between Criminel and the lords of the dead, the Gedes.

Pablo’s chief possessing spirit, Gran Buá, also is considered a “diabolical” and “hot” force. This *luá* is the master of the deep forest, likes to reside in large trees, and knows the properties of plants. When he arrives and possesses an adept, the person is dressed in red and black to signal his presence. In Haiti, he is particularly invoked to oversee a *pile fey*, or “shredding of leaves,” the mixing of herbs for initiations, ritual baths, cures, or other spiritual endeavours. James, Millet, and Alarcón have observed that in Cuba Gran Buá may assist an *oungan* or *mambo* in performing herbal therapies (2007:165, 218-227). For Pablo Milanés, keeping an herb garden is important to his work as an *oungan*, and he always proudly shows me his medicinal plants when I visit his home in the mountains. Ethnographer Alexis Alarcón notes that veneration of Gran Buá is widespread in Cuba. For a number of ritual specialists, this deity comprises part of the corps of inherited spirits that “own their head” or possess them, and he speculates that Gran Buá is more important in Cuba than in Haiti. During my visits to Haiti, I observed that while Grand Bwa (his designation in Haitian Creole) is certainly a recognized

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<sup>141</sup> Within Haitian belief systems, the concept of “diabolical” or “demonic” is complex and differs from Christian-based religion in the sense that even nefarious spirits are accepted as part of the condition of the world, a metaphysical philosophy which does not clearly divide between “good” and “evil.” It is expected that humans cannot avoid interaction with a variety of elemental beings, who, whether “diabolical” or “angelic” may both assist and harm. See chapter V, “Vodú, magia y hechicería” (“Vodú, Magic, and Sorcery”) in *El Vodú en Cuba* (2007[1992]: 253-291) for a discussion of the place of the infamous spirits in Cuban Vodú. See also Métraux’s chapter “Magic and Sorcery” in *Voodoo in Haiti* (1972:266-322), Cosentino’s *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (1995) and Richman’s *Vodou and Migration* (2005).

<sup>142</sup> My thanks to Haitian *mambo* Maude Marie Evans and ethnographer Katherine Smith for clarifications about Bawon Kriminel.

spirit, I never met an *oungan* or *mambo* for whom he was the main tutelary deity, as is the case with Pablo Milanés and other ritual specialists in Cuba. Also, Alarcón noticed while conducting fieldwork in the Dominican Republic that Gran Buá appeared to be less emphasized in Haitian descendant communities there (personal conversation July 23, 2008). Both Gran Buá and Criminel are spirits whose aspects differ between Cuba and Haiti.

At the *petró* party in Chicharrones, after offerings of food and drink had been set out, prayers uttered, and animals groomed and blessed, the *matanza*, or ritual sacrifice, began. First, the fowl were killed and then plucked by the women of the community while held over a small bonfire. This is believed to “heat up” an offering, making it more potent. Gran Buá, occupying the body of Pablo Milanés, killed the goats. To do so, he mounted each goat, sitting astride it and grappling with it. Gran Buá brandished his knife, then slashed the goat’s throat swiftly and decisively, demonstrating his mastery over the sacrifice and skill with a blade.<sup>143</sup> The bloodshed was copious, spurting in all directions, spraying the clothes and faces of onlookers. After the initial gush, the rest of the blood was collected in bowls. James, Millet, and Alarcón observe that the animal’s blood, along with its head, feet, tail, genitals, and entrails, are the spirits’ favorite strengthening foods (2007:122-124). These parts of the animals are given directly to the deities, and usually placed on plates or in bowls on the altar or in iron cauldrons on the ground below it (and eventually removed when they begin to putrefy).

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<sup>143</sup> See also James, Millet, and Alarcón (2007:122-123) for descriptions of the dramatic manner in which both Gran Buá and Togo mount animals and wrestle with them before effecting a sacrifice.



Figure 29 – Gran Buá in the body of Pablo Milanés completes the *matanza*, or ritual sacrifice, at a public Vodú Petró party in Chicharrones during the Festival del Caribe – ©Viddal 2009

In some cases, as we shall see in another vignette in this chapter, animal parts such as the feet and head are buried in a special hole in the ground. James, Millet, and Alarcón were told that some spirits prefer to eat “below the earth” (2007:153, 231). After the spirits have received their meal, the rest of each animal is usually skinned and butchered, and the meat is cooked for participants. Last to be sacrificed during the *fet* in Chicharrones was the large male pig, which had its throat cut in dramatic fashion from ear to ear. Criminel, dressed in black and possessing the body of Tato Milanés, then secured the pig’s testicles and hefted the large organs, carrying them aloft and stamping around in the open area, scowling.<sup>144</sup> Onlookers drew back, ogling the

<sup>144</sup> During their field research, James, Millet, and Alarcón noticed that Criminel in particular and also Gran Buá and Togo generally maintain fierce facial expressions, and their movements may be sudden, brusque, and wild. The

spectacle. Both Criminel and Gran Buá then displayed their dexterity with blades, slashing towards their own bellies without harm and rolling around on the ground with machetes.

Criminel gnawed on the pig testicles, making a show of eating them raw.



Figure 30 – Criminel, in the body of Tato Milanés, striding around with raw pig testicles – ©Viddal 2009

After a short pause to recover from the spate of butchering and knife play, both Criminel and Gran Buá began blessing participants and onlookers and giving short consultations. One by one, people who wanted a blessing approached Gran Buá, who looked into their eyes, then drew crosses on the foreheads, hands, and back, using blood. He periodically moistened his fingers with fresh blood dipped from the wound of the still-present corpse of the pig.

Some seekers received a brief gestured consultation, indicating that they pay attention to a part of their bodies such as the head, heart, or belly. The *luá* also offered those present swigs of *tifey*, a bottle of rum laced with herbs, in particular proffering the fiery drink to special guests including a cameraman, news correspondents, provincial bureaucrats, ethnographers, and the foreigners at hand.

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various Ogun spirits, in contrast, although also fierce warriors, typically display a cordial demeanor and comport themselves in the manner of imposing military generals (2007:161-165, 235-236).



Figure 31 – Gran Buá in the body of Pablo Milanés blesses attendee Antonio Mejías Limonta at a Vodú Petró party while a press representative films in the background – ©Viddal 2009

In the context of a public demonstration of Vodú, showmanship and theatricality were facets of this *petró* party organized by the Milanés family. It was a self-exoticizing spectacle. Pablo and Tato Milanés embodied an intensifying drama as, mounted by “hot” spirits, they played with machetes, sacrificed animals, and chewed the raw pig testicles. The event seemed orchestrated to impress participants and observers. The Brazilian documentary filmmakers in attendance—as well as the ethnomusicologists, representatives from organizations linked to the Ministry of Culture, and other spectators—by riveting their attention on *haitiano-cubano* culture, created an aura in which Haitian traditions took center stage and made a strong impression.

## A Bloody Merengue

Is there a difference between rituals conducted at home versus those that are part of the program of a cultural festival? In 2010, I attended a *fet luá* at Pablo's rural house that featured similarly gory and spectacular phases, punctuating what otherwise had the atmosphere of a festive country bash. Extravagantly macabre moments were not lacking, but they were spread out during a several-day fiesta instead fitting into an afternoon demonstration.

Pablo's family had constructed a *tonnel* or thatch-roofed pavilion before the event and borrowed a sound system and generator. During the early part of the day, members of Pablo's and Tato's congregation busied themselves with ritual preparations: cooking food; beautifying the tables, or altars, set for the spirits; gathering and soaking medicinal and magical herbs; and readying animals, inside the house and at various sites on the property. Although rites would feature feeding the "hot" spirits belonging to the family, including Tato's Criminel and Pablo's Gran Buá, the event also included a "Manyé Mort," a table decked with food and drink for the ancestors, completed with a grainy photograph of the deceased family patriarch, Haitian immigrant Arsenault Silnet (whom we met in Chapter Two), and below the table, a "Manyé Masá," or small repast for the sacred trickster twins, called Marassa in Haiti. These spirits are conceived of as holy children. They do not serve themselves from a table but instead like to sit on the ground and eat with their hands, and are offered candies and treats.

Meanwhile, in the shady *tonnel*, people not directly engaged in ritual arrangements danced merengue and salsa to booming speakers, and farmers conducted business, briskly buying and selling goats by weight. The ritual event began in the late afternoon with a formal signal: the blowing of a conch shell. Drummers assembled. Dressed in ritual garb, black and red shirts for the men, red and blue blouses for the women, members of the family and congregation paraded



with flags and sang for the spirits. Initiated priests and priestesses displayed crossed bands strung with beads, ornaments, and polished seeds across their chests. Pablo's included a whistle, which he blew to direct activities.



Figure 32 – Weighing and selling goats during a weekend Vodú party at the Milanés farm – ©Viddal 2010

The *fet* included the ritual killing of sacrificial animals. Tato Milanés, dressed in Ogun's red, deftly supervised the blessing of the birds, sprinkling holy water on chickens and guinea fowl, and the adornment of a goat by attaching candles to its horns. The animal was then positioned at the doorjamb of the entrance of the

house. Gran Buá, in the body of Pablo, performed the sacrifice, flamboyantly straddling the goat and slashing its throat with a mighty stroke that almost decapitated the beast. The *matanza* of the animals culminated with Gran Buá nimbly dancing Haitian merengue in the pool of blood that had accumulated at his front door as the animals were dispatched. Barefoot in the slick liquid, Gran Buá seemed to enjoy showing his dancing skills to those gathered. Many in the crowd pulled out cellphone cameras and snapped pictures. Afterwards, he blessed family members and other congregants, including small children, by smearing crosses of fresh blood on their foreheads and hands.



Figure 33 – Gran Buá in the body of Pablo Milanés blesses a child with blood at a Vodú event at the Milanés farm in Pilón del Cauto – ©Viddal 2010

Although the gathering was held in a private home, the Casa del Caribe supported the ritual party. As such, we might think of it as a diversified or cosmopolitan type of event. Although it was a Vodú rite hosted by a traditional rural priest in the mountains, the *fet* connected locals with professionals in arts and culture programming, researchers, and urban practitioners of related Afro-Cuban religious traditions. The Casa del Caribe helped with the advance purchase of animals. It also sent a truck

up to join the festivities, filled with cases of rum, other supplies, and dozens of partygoers, including city-based artists, musicians, and members of a Palo temple in Santiago. In the eyes of the Milanés family, institutional funding and non-Haitian participants did not make the *fet* less “authentic.” Instead, as discussed in Chapter Three, Pablo Milanés and his family and godchildren explained to me that they welcomed the link with the Casa del Caribe. Funding from the cultural institution enabled them to honor the spirits with a bigger and better party, and the out-of-town guests lent flair to the festivities. They were proud to put their Haitian traditions in the public eye, and to be invited to be showcased in a regional and national cultural spotlight.

The Festival del Caribe is not the only state-sponsored cultural event that features demonstrations or examples of rituals as part of its programming. At the Eva Gaspar en Memorium Festival in the town of Violeta in Ciego de Ávila province, described in Chapter Three, Vodú priest Tomás Poll Jr. hosted an evening *fet*, and during the event he was possessed

by his tutelary spirit Togo the bull. In Haiti, a bull is this deity's traditional sacrifice. But in Cuba, governmental management of the agricultural sector includes strict regulation of bovine production. It is illegal to kill a calf, cow, or bull without a difficult-to-obtain permit. Cuban Togos have adapted to local laws, and are generally happy to accept the gift of a pig, the common substitution in Cuban Vodú. At the festival, Tomás Poll Jr, mounted by Togo, oversaw the digging of a hole in the ground at the base of a tree, then paced about brandishing a machete. Next, the embodied divinity undertook the slaughter of a black pig. First, he "rode" the animal, crouching astride it with fists clenched and wrestling with it to show his prowess; then he dispatched it with the sudden jab of a knife as participants watched wide-eyed. Some parts of the animal, along with samples of the root vegetables and other foods offered the spirit, were interred in the hole. The rest of the pig was roasted and eaten. Those present at the ritual included members of the folkloric groups attending the Eva Gaspar Festival, such as Tomás Poll's own company, Renacer Haitiano. Drumming for the event were members of Lionel Martinez' Camagüey-based troupe, Caidije. Townspeople, festival organizers, a few anthropologists, and a representative from the Haitian Embassy in Havana filled out the audience.

My colleague and friend Antonio Mejías Limonta video recorded for me a multi-day ritual for the Vodú spirits in the village of Ramon de Guaninao in Santiago province, held while I was outside Cuba. The renowned *oungan* Tomás Poll Sr., who migrated to Cuba from Saint-Louis-du-Sud in southern Haiti, made this coffee growing settlement his home for many years, until he passed away in the late 1980s. Today, Tomás Jr. and his sisters Blanca and Ana Rosa take turns organizing and financing annual rituals honoring the spirits. Like the open-to-the-public Vodú ritual during the Eva Gaspar Festival, the home-based family *fet* held in the village was not lacking in drama or theatricality. On the night of December 16, 2011, a fierce Togo

presided over the ritual sacrifice of a black pig, tying it up with chains at the edge of a hole in the ground and killing the animal so that its blood cascaded into the cavity in the earth. Afterwards, the visiting deity seated himself on top of the pig's deceased body and cut off its testicles. This "power food" was shared with two other "hot" and "diabolical" spirits—Lenglensou and Criminel—by burying it. Last, the spirit danced for the cheering crowd.

Two of the *petró* rituals described above were performed in the context of cultural festivals, to which journalists, researchers, government administrators, and the general public were invited. The *fet* held in Pablo Milanés' home in the mountains received patronage from the Casa del Caribe and the party's guest list included arts celebrities, culture programmers, and religion colleagues from the city. What about smaller-scale Vodú celebrations that are unconnected to state organizations and lack institutional funding? Let us take as an example the annual Poll family Vodú *fet* in Ramon de Guaninao described above. Although this kind of event does not take place in the context of institutional sponsorship, it is nevertheless in the public eye, and, I argue, similarly exhibits Haitian cultural traits to a Cuban audience. While the extended Poll clan hosts the event and many *haitiano-cubano* families participate, attendees also include people not of Haitian-heritage: generally the local Cubans in the village who do not have any Haitian ancestors, yet the *fet* does not lack for audacious acts and spectacular effects. Even a very local audience, it seems, can be a forum to remind the surrounding community just how "badass" and bold Haitians, who might otherwise lack social and economic power, can be. Decades before cultural support—official and otherwise—was available, these spectacular effects served to impress Cuban neighbors, co-workers, and employers with the power of *haitiano-cubanos*. It also could have served as reassurance of their own power. When you are downtrodden, it helps

to impress yourself with your own audacity. I believe they are performing audaciousness for both themselves and others.

Does audacity also have a role in non-public Vodú occasions? If one considers carefully, imaginatively orchestrated displays of impressiveness to be audacious, the answer can be *yes*. As discussed in Chapter Three, non-public or semi-public activities include consultations and healings, as well as the keeping of home altars. Practitioners tend their family spirits by doing such things as refreshing the water, flowers, candles, rum, or perfume on a home altar. These sacred spaces can be simple or complex, modest or striking. For ritual specialists, an impressive consulting area may attract clients and garner the respect of locals, regardless of ethnic background. Tato Milanés' office or *consulta* features a floor covered with iron pots or cauldrons turned upside-down. Each represents a *trabajo*, a “work” done for a client. Tato's many cauldrons emphasize his many years of experience as a specialist and attest to his mastery and large number of clients. Pablo Milanés' consultation room, also referred to as a *cay misté* in Cuba (from the Haitian Creole *kay mistè*, the “dwelling” or “abode” of the spirits or “mysteries”) features beautiful beaded flags which he acquired during a trip to Haiti, as well as other striking items such as large iron crosses in a tomb-shaped shrine, which demonstrate his ability to work with the spirits of the dead. A stair-step style altar showcases representations of the *luá* in the form of colorful plaster statues and lithographs of Catholic saints, while his work table is covered with *fundamentos*, or spirit stones that capture and hold mystical essences; talismans such as carved figures of *yab* or *dyab* (“devils”); the remains of varied offerings for the divinities including animal skulls, bones, and blood; and tools such as candles, bottles of roots in alcohol, knives, satin kerchiefs called *mouchua* (color-coded and embroidered with symbols to identify and adorn any *luá* that may “visit his head” or possess him), and playing cards for divination. His

consulting room also features pieces by local artisans, such as beautifully hand-painted leather chairs crafted by members of Taller Ennegro, an artists' collective based in the town of Palma Soriano. As discussed in Chapter Three, Taller Ennegro takes inspiration from Vodú and includes members of the extended Milanés family. Pablo Milanés' place of business is replete with visually striking and impressive objects that allude to his professionalism and expertise as a ritual specialist. It is noteworthy that even semi-private Vodú activities may embrace a gothic, exotic, or dramatic flair, signaling to both insiders and outsiders that Haitian religious practitioners commune with mysterious and powerful forces.

For all their spectacularity, Haitian ritual parties function much like celebrations in the United States. The *fet luá* are large events that require extensive advance planning and marshaling of resources. Like holidays and religious ceremonies in North American mainland, they involve communal preparation and occur at predictable times. They celebrate important holidays that mark the year and build family and community unity. Just as a memorable New Year's celebration or a beautiful baptism or wedding can commemorate the expansion of a family or exhibit the religious identity of a child, Vodú events create meaning and mark the passage of time through ritual.

Like the *fet luá*, the folkloric dance performances by *haitiano-cubano* companies also feature spectacular feats of coordination, strength, and daring. Modesto, a dancer and drummer with Grupo Folklórico La Caridad of Ramon de Guaninao, enacted a choreography at the Casa del Caribe's performance patio during the Festival del Caribe 2010 in which he laid an empty rum bottle on the belly of a prone and blindfolded dancer, circled him while the drummers pounded, brandished a machete, and culminated by smashing the bottle—without eviscerating

his fellow dancer.<sup>145</sup> Next, the women of Grupo La Caridad manipulated blazing torches, passing flames across their arms and legs and the soles of their feet without scorching themselves. During other performances, Grupo Folklórico Thompson featured an act in which a dancer firmly holds lead singer Matiti’s tongue with a handkerchief, and then saws across it with a machete, but causes no harm. Members of Bonito Patuá stage a choreography during which dancers carefully smash bottles then lay down on the broken glass without cutting themselves. In addition to knife-play and manipulation of fire, almost all the groups showcase feats of strength and balance. The most popular involves carrying a table onto the stage, covering it with a white tablecloth, and setting it with glasses filled with water. A dancer or dancers crouch down, grab a corner of the table between their teeth, and hoist it aloft without spilling the liquids, using only the muscles of their jaws, arms extended to show they are not lifting the table with their hands. Feats of agility, strength, and “magical” abilities feature in the choreographies of all of the *haitiano-cubano* folklore companies.



Figure 34 – Members of Grupo Caidije prepare to lift a laden table with their teeth – © Viddal 2010

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<sup>145</sup> See Figure 25 for a photo of that performance.

## The Spectacular as Self-Defense

What might performing feats of strength, daring, or mystery in public accomplish for Haitians and their descendants in Cuba? Guanche and Moreno argue that by eating ritual foods such as raw pig or goat testicles, practitioners believe they are ingesting a substance that will amplify power and virility (1988:38-39). The idea of “contagious magic” was elaborated by early anthropologists and folklorists and still resonates within social theory today.

But I argue that another key reason has been and remains self-defense. Spectacular feats demonstrate to outsiders that Haitians are not helpless. They amaze outsiders and manage impressions, and as such can function as a kind of auto-defense for a potentially vulnerable social group. Despite their poverty and lack of formal education and language skills, Haitians laborers in Cuba utilized cultural traditions as a tool to inoculate themselves against harassment, as historian Barry Carr explains:

But Haitians were not simply victims of persecution and exploitation. It can also be argued that the layers of discrimination that enveloped Haitian immigrants provided them with a powerful way of asserting their difference and securing respect—a respect born out of the awe and even fear with which Cubans viewed them. Haitian workers were clearly not engaging in respectable forms of class struggle or exhibiting respectable forms of masculinity. Instead, they were responding to the derision and hostility of Cuban economic and cultural elites by defending their worth through ostentatious displays of the traits for which they were condemned by their critics...Haitians knew how to exploit their sinister reputation to heighten the cultural separation between themselves and the Cuban-born population. And when all else failed, they could use fear of the “exotic” and “savage” to secure respect and minimize harassment. Moreover, their prestige in matters of magic and herbal medicine could earn Haitians the respect of fellow workers and even colonos. In other words, Haitians could turn marginality into an asset (1998:95).

James, Millet, and Alarcón posit that “Vodú made believers feel less vulnerable” and offered them a sense of safe haven (2007:76). They conjecture that “extreme audacity...and the spectacular is a means to be accepted, to avoid being rejected, and to obligate the owner of the



farm, who pays his workers a pittance, to experience being sprayed with the blood of sacrificed goat when he comes to visit the festivities at the *bohio*. At that moment, the Haitian immigrant is the one with the power” (2007:94).<sup>146</sup> They argue that the practice of Vodú did more than re-affirm for Haitians their traditions and identity. Vodú, in its boldness, was a formidable resource, a means by which Haitians introduced themselves in their new Cuban world. Discrimination was so bad, reveals Alarcón, that Haitians could virtually be killed without repercussion. So, the Haitians encouraged Cubans’ fear of their magical powers, such as being able to fly at night or other legendary abilities (Alexis Alarcón, personal conversation July 23, 2008). The spectacular is a mechanism that insulates *haitiano-cubanos* from derogation, and provides evidence of their abilities and mastery in areas of otherworldly power and mystery.

Conducting fieldwork among communities of Haitian migrants in Guadeloupe, anthropologist Paul Brodwin found that Haitians would “self-consciously elaborate the position of cultural outsider in order to defend against their denigration” (2007:1) by embracing and encouraging the stereotype that they had access to a stronger, more authentic, more “African” cultural base. He explains that Guadeloupians believed that “the Haitian houngan is more powerful than local folk healers” and in fact that some people “explicitly ranked the spiritual potency of various types of healers. They placed Africans first, followed by Haitian hougans (who, as one friend explained, are more powerful because Haiti has preserved its African culture longer than the Antilles) Guadeloupean gadézafes, and finally folk healers from Martinique” (2007:22). As Brodwin discovered, Haitian migrants in Guadeloupe drew on stereotypes of Haitianness to position their cultural distinctiveness as a social resource.

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<sup>146</sup> All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

## A Refined and Graceful Dinner Party

Preparations started early and continued throughout the day of December 11, 2008, at the home of *mambo* Elena Celestien Vidal in the town of Contramaestre in Santiago province. The house was scoured and polished, the main room furbished with an ample table, and extra chairs were borrowed to accommodate a copious array of guests. The walls of the dining area were draped with white cloths and festooned with herbs, making a kind of bower or pavilion inside the house, and the table lovingly decorated with a white lace cloth, lithographs of Catholic saints, flowers, candles, cologne, and fancily dressed dolls. As each was carefully prepared, the table was gradually set with an array of fine food and drink. Two chairs, for the guest of honor and her consort, were placed facing the table, made more comfortable with cushions, and draped in white. Everything had to look perfect, because a very elegant guest had been invited: Ecili Freyda.<sup>147</sup> She would expect to be feted with the best: a lavish banquet in opulent surroundings. Elena Celestien worked industriously and attentively to create a beautiful and fruitful party, an event that would entice and honor the spirits, and, in return, would bless her family and congregation with luck and abundance.

Elena's father migrated from Haiti to Cuba in 1920, and she was born in 1929. In her youth, she lived in the coffee growing village of Ramon de Guaninao in the Sierra Maestra mountains (home as well to the famous *oungan* Tomás Poll Sr.). Although Elena moved to the town of Contramaestre in 1993 because the lower altitude and drier climate helped her asthma, she remained in contact with other practitioners of Vodú located in more remote villages, including the Poll and Casal families. A well-regarded spiritual advisor and ritual specialist, Elena presides over a sizeable home temple and busy consulting practice. She exemplifies the

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<sup>147</sup> The name of the goddess is typically glossed as "Erzulie" or "Ezili" in Haiti and "Ecili" in Cuba.

interconnectedness of the Vodú community in Cuba in that, although she no longer travels long distances to attend other practitioners' *fet luá*, she keeps abreast of news and events in Haitian-Cuban enclaves, a pattern which contributes to some standardization of Vodú practice in Cuba.



Figure 35 – Elena Celestien Vidal preparing the “white table” for Ecili – ©Viddal 2008

The Manyé Blanche or Mesa Blanca is a *fet luá* or ritual festivity that honors the *rada* or “cool” spirits. In Haitian language, *manje* (or *manyé* as it is usually spelled in Cuba) refers to eating or a meal. Paired with the French word for “white,” or glossed in Spanish as “white table,” this “white meal” is a gracious and tasteful event. Because Ecili Freyda, often just referred to as Ecili, is the principal *luá blanche* in Cuba, a Manyé Blanche is particularly dedicated to her. Ecili is typically represented in Cuba by a lithograph of the Virgin Mary or Saint Cecelia, or any saintly being dressed in white or pastels. Ecili has been described by scholars of Haitian religion as an “Aphrodite” figure in the Vodou/Vodú pantheon, and she has also been compared to Santería’s Ochun (see for example James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007:207, Métraux 1972:110).

She is flirtatious and loves luxury, especially perfumes, and enjoys liqueurs, wine, and cakes. Maya Deren, conducting fieldwork in Haiti in the 1940s, described the arrival of this divinity: “Erzulie moves in an atmosphere of infinite luxury, a perfume of refinement, which...pervades the very air of the peristyle...One has the impression that a fresh, cooling breeze has sprung up somewhere and that the heat has become less intense, less oppressive (1953:139).

At a dinner party in her honor, Haitian descendants in Cuba serve her “white” foods, such as corn or rice with an egg on top, fried eggs, white rice, popcorn, or gourmand staples like fish, chicken fricassee, goat in sauce, and boiled root vegetables in sauces. Desserts are important, including rice pudding, “natilla” or custard, coconut and peanut brittles called “tablet,” and “bonbons” of all kinds (see also James, Millet, and Alarcón for a discussion of foods typically served at a Manyé Blanche, 2007:207). Beverages include coffee, local fruit wine, and homemade liqueurs. In Haiti, factory-made refreshments such as sweet soda pop are common on tables or altars for the “cool” spirits. In Cuba, since these are available only in hard currency, they are prohibitively expensive for most believers subsisting in the Cuban peso economy, and I have rarely seen them decorating a ritual table. It is typical to bake special breads for Ecili and the *rada* divinities. James, Millet, and Alarcón remark, “in a mesa blanca, wine and bread are fundamental” (2007:210). At a Manyé Blanche at Pablo Milanés home in Pilon del Cauto, I saw breads baked in the shape of shells, turtles, and crocodiles, all aquatic animals, signaling the “cool” and “watery” nature of the *rada* spirits, and the fact that many, such as Lasiren the mermaid, Simbí, a river spirit, Agüé, the “admiral of the seas,” and Yondón/Jondon, an unusual aquatic spirit brought by Tomás Poll Sr., are linked with water or the ocean. The *fet* at Elena Celestien’s home featured pastries and a frothy white cake with “felicidades Santa Cecilia” outlined in frosting. Elena also set a glass of wine on the table with a small hunk of bread

balanced across the top, an example of the Catholic icons used in Vodú. Other items that typically decorate a table set for Ecili and the *rada* divinities in Cuban Vodú include candles to “illuminate” the spirits’ way, flowers, and porcelain plates and flatware. Ecili, unlike some of the “barbaric” or “wild” fiery *petró* deities, does *not* eat with her hands, but delicately uses knife, fork, and spoon.

Ecili has a lover, husband, or companion. At *mambo* Elena’s, Ecili’s escort was played by Elena’s husband Isaias Cervantes, considered to represent Ogun. Cervantes is not susceptible to being mounted by spirit; he performs the role of consort without embodying the divinity. While in Contramestre Ecili is always squired by Ogun, James, Millet, and Alarcón note that the identity of Ecili’s companion varies by community. For example, in the village of Barrancas, Ecili’s companion is not Ogun but Simbí (2007:201).



Figure 36 – Elena and her husband Isias seated at the table for Ecili – ©Viddal 2008

Many *haitiano-cubano* folklore groups reference this ritual by performing the song “Ecili bel fanm” (“Ecili the beautiful woman”) and feature a choreography paying homage to this spirit. During a performance at Casa del Caribe in July 2009 by Petit Dancé of Las Tunas, a dancer playing Ecili was seated on a chair decked with white cloth while male dancers reverently entertained her with song and dance. At a heritage festival in Ciego de Ávila province in March 2009, Ecili arrived dressed in white with a golden crown and was carried onto the stage on a palanquin during a performance by the troupe Renovación Haiti from Cueto. In both performances, the lightest-skinned female member of the group portrayed Ecili, representing a spirit envisioned phenotypically as a EuroAfrican racial *mélange*.

Preparations at *mambo* Elena Celestien’s included readying and sacrificing the animals for the feast. First, she supervised filling a large basin with water and added herbs, cologne, and holy water. Several white hens and two doves were sprinkled with the mixture, as well as a small white goat. All were dried with a clean white towel, then the goat’s head and back were combed. While completing the preparations, Elena Celestien and her assistants sang a welcoming song: “*Ezili o, ou bel o, ou bel o, ala youn bel fanm, n’ale*” explaining that it meant: “Let’s go to the beautiful woman’s fiesta.” Afterwards, all the animals were fed bites of food from the gods’ banquet. These preparations took place outside under the thatch-roofed arbor called a *tonnel* or *peristyle*. Once the outdoor preparations were finished, participants changed into white clothes. The drummers positioned their instruments inside the indoor bower, including the biggest drum, or *maman tambou*, a middle-sized drum called a *segon*, and the smallest, the *legede* or *lekete*, as well as a *trian* or bell, in this case a hoe blade struck with a metal pin. (see also James, Millet, and Alarcón 2007:209, Esquenazi 1989:83-84, and Ramos Venereo and Vilar Álvarez 1997:269-281 for discussion of the instruments used in Cuban Vodú *rada* events).

When preparing a Manyé Blanche, the *matanza* or killing must be done outdoors, away from the *mesa blanca* in its bower. Initiated Vodú priest Antonio Meijas Limonta explained that it is important to finish the sacrifices well in advance of a Manyé Blanche. The butchery must be finished before Ecili arrives, because she cannot abide seeing blood. While the fiercest *petró* spirits such as Criminel love a bloody spectacle, and in fact do the killing themselves, Ecili would swoon to see such savagery (personal conversation February 16, 2010). James, Millet, and Alarcón note that for a Manyé Blanche, the animals' spiritual essence is fed to the *luá* by placing parts such as a feather on the table (2007:203). Unlike a *petró* party, a Manyé Blanche takes place indoors, on a tile or cement floor, not on earth. While the fiery deities enjoy being tendered the blood of animals and other parts such as the heads, tails, feet, and organs, seeing bowls of blood poured over altar items and animal parts arranged on the table or altar or buried in the ground, the cool divinities prefer a genteel repast, and the plumes of the sacrificed birds suffice to decorate the table.

Elena Celestien's Manyé Blanche party began with her leading the congregation—her spiritual godchildren and clients, the musicians, neighbors, and other guests including myself—in singing the *himno de apertura* or opening anthem, which is also the Dessalinienne, Haiti's national anthem, a stirring martial tune.<sup>148</sup> In Contramaestre and Ramon de Guaninao, the words are glossed as “la, le, la, la, la, la, la.” Very few families in Cuba have retained the lyrics. I have only met one person—Ramon Hilmo Sandi of Manatí in Las Tunas, a younger brother of the renowned *mambo* Titina—who is able to sing the words, and who proudly performed them for me in French: “*Pour le pays, pour les ancêtres, marchons unis, marchons unis...*” After the anthem, an opening riff of drumming punctuated the room, and the pair—Elena Celestien and

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<sup>148</sup> Audio versions are available for listening on these websites: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_Dessalinienne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Dessalinienne) and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXOOqj\\_wUpE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXOOqj_wUpE)

her husband, Isaias Cervantes—were graciously seated. Next, to the sound of more drumming, the *mambo* and her gentleman solemnly waved small white flags in time to the music.

James, Millet, and Alarcón note that some Manyé Blanche events open with a violin concert (2007:209).<sup>149</sup> While Elena Celestien’s Manyé Blanche did not include stringed instruments, I did attend a Manyé Blanche in the Los Pinos neighborhood of Santiago, held by a *mambo* named Elena Sansón Marquez. There, I saw a father and daughter playing a violin duet on the evening of December 16, 2008. Special music for Ecili demonstrates the effort made to honor her with the chicest and classiest.



Figure 37 – Father and daughter play violin for Saint Barbara and Saint Lazarus at a Manyé Blanche at the home of Elena Sansón – ©Viddal 2008

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<sup>149</sup> The use of violin music to honor the goddess of love is not exclusive to Ecili. There is a Santería ritual called a “violin for Ochun,” which honors this feminine deity, preferably in posh style. In 2008, I attended a party honoring Ochun hosted by a prosperous *santera* in Santiago city that included not only a violinist, but a pianist as well, and finally, as the *pièce de résistance*, Santiago’s madrigal choir.



As Elena Celestien and her husband sat facing the white table and fanning their white flags, the spirit arrived in Elena's body. She began to shiver in her chair and her eyes lost focus. Assistants removed her glasses and wiped her face with a perfumed handkerchief. She swayed, but found her balance as Ecili took over her head. First, Ecili danced with Ogun. Then, she turned her attention to the congregation, offering each person greetings, a hug, a kiss, and dancing with her devotees. On this evening, Ecili was pleased with her party. The congregation was happy. They went to great expense to throw a lavish *fet*, and were rewarded with Ecili's gratification, which attracts luck and prosperity.

#### Considering the Manyé Blanche – Public Performances of Grace and Civility

While *pétro* rituals demonstrate *haitiano-cubanos'* vigor and fierceness, the dinner party honoring the *rada* spirit Ecili described above put on display exactly the opposite: it was an enactment of refinement and grace. Both types of ritual performances protect and shield Haitians, but in different ways. Spectacular, agile, surreal, or grotesque acts signal that it may be dangerous to harass or maltreat Haitians. Graceful and elegant rituals refute stereotypes that Haitians are uneducated or barbaric in comparison to Cubans, validating their inclusion in “respectable” society.

McCarthy Brown, attending Vodou events in Haitian communities in New York city, observes that “Ezili Freda drapes herself in romance, wealth, and social status and at the same time reminds Haitians how precarious and superficial such things are...when Ezili Freda is inside the house, when sensuality and love are in place in the family (or perhaps when money and status are secure), the people inside are safe from the rain and slippery mud that surround them” (1991:250). It seems that for Vodouists everywhere, serving the gracious but demanding

goddess of love may represent the struggle to leave poverty behind, transcend social barriers, and ascend to the imagined security of a higher social status.

I believe that in the case of a Manyé Blanche, one signal of refinement and civility is an element of “Frenchness.” Ecili/Ezili is envisioned as a light-skinned woman of mixed European and African ancestry. Because pre-revolutionary Haiti was a French colony, her whiteness is coded as French. Cultural theorist Joan Dayan argues that the spirits of the Haitian pantheon, although regarded as rooted in Africa, are also metaphysical responses to the brutal world of colonial plantation slavery (1995:36). Dayan regards Ezili as a deity inspired by the quintessential mulatta mistress or *fille de joie* of the slave owner, an iconic fixture in Saint-Domingue society. She argues that when believers throw a party for Ezili, “the bits of lace, the elaborate toilette, the wine and perfumes are part of a social and collective drama” based on the “opulence and tyranny” exhibited by the white elites of the colony and the stereotypical role of the mixed woman of color as a sexualized and glamorized mistress (1995:64-65). While a number of other Vodú spirits prefer the local foods of the peasant, served in a simple gourd bowl or on a banana leaf, and eat with their hands, Ecili dines only on proper dishes with utensils. She savors imported luxuries such as perfume, and relishes foods based on European culinary customs including breads, desserts, and wine or liqueurs. Ethnographer and historian Karen Richman observes that “in pigmentation, ethnicity, and appetite, the lwa blan resemble...cosmopolitan outsiders” and remarks that her informants even refer to some *rada* spirits as “bourgeois” (2005:154). Richman clarifies that the lwa blan, and particularly Ezili, “eat dessert, a course foreign to the peasant diet, served in fine porcelain, china, and glass” (2005:158).

The notion that French culture, education, and mores epitomize good taste, high culture, and refinement has been a pervasive trope for centuries. Historian Jacqueline Grant explains that the perception of French cultural preeminence was firmly entrenched in colonial Cuba, remarking “French culture was considered by whites in nineteenth-century Cuba to be the standard of civilization. French music, French dances, and French fashions were all sought after by those hoping to present themselves as ‘civilized,’ and in Cuba French Creole culture signified as French” (2012:216). She notes that the black and mixed-race refugees arriving in eastern Cuba after fleeing the uprisings in Saint-Domingue benefitted from being considered “French.”



Figure 38 – Mme Lescaille by Hazard

Grant tells the story of Madame Lescailles, whose Santiago guest house was praised in a travelogue authored by a nineteenth century American adventurer named Samuel Hazard, who penned a drawing of his *francesa* hostess, extolling her Frenchness but not mentioning her African heritage.<sup>150</sup> In fact, this was typical of Cuban writing as well, says Grant, and she suggests that association with French mores was seen “as being superior enough to dominate

negative associations with African birth or African parentage (2012:187). Like the descendants of the first wave migrants from Saint-Domingue, the heirs of the diasporic Haitian laborers may access a “cachet of Frenchness” in their relationships with host societies.

Historian Lauren Derby explains that in Haiti’s neighbor, the Dominican Republic, the dominant image of Haitian migrant laborers working in Dominican cane fields is one of

<sup>150</sup> Samuel Hazard, *Cuba with Pen and Pencil*, London: Sampson Low, Marston Low, & Searle, 1873, drawing from page 438. Since Hazard traveled in Cuba in the 1860s, it seems likely that Mme. Lescaille, who delights Hazard by calling him “Monsieur” and speaking French, is a first generation descendant of Saint-Domingue migrants. Also of interest is the ubiquity of French language still pervasive in Santiago so many decades after the arrival of the original wave of refugees from Saint-Domingue.

“diseased, smelly savages” (1994:512). However, argues Derby, complex associations embed Haitians into the history of the Dominican Republic, where they have been glossed as both abject and glamorous. Before national frontiers between the two countries were increasingly patrolled and secured in the 1940s and 1950s, Dominicans in the borderlands regularly crossed the porous state lines to purchase luxury goods available in Haiti and were reportedly impressed by the affluence they saw in towns on the other side, where Haitian elites “lived in higher style and in more elegant houses than Dominicans” (Derby 1994:513).

Visiting Santo Domingo’s trendy *zona colonial* with its attractive cobbled streets and sixteenth century plazas teeming with tourists, I noticed many Haitians working in the service industry. A young sales associate in a jewelry shop and a waiter in a café, both Haitian, explained to me that they were hired because of their ability to speak French. The workers believe that their employers think their ability to speak French will both charm sightseers from France or Quebecois vacationers and add a touch of elegance to the establishment.

When reflecting on the symbolism of a Manyé Blanche ritual in Cuba, a tasteful celebration for a Vodú deity, we see that it can contest the typecasting of Haitians as unschooled or barbarous, instead establishing Haitians as a group who contribute sophistication to Cuban society. Haitians (and Saint-Dominguans of color before them) in the diaspora have used the attributes of “Frenchness” as cultural currency for centuries.

### Vodou in Haiti Compared to Cuban Vodú

Philosophies and traditions brought by various ethnic groups from Africa interacted and melded in colonial Saint-Domingue, a process that accelerated after the Haitian Revolution when the French colony became the independent republic of Haiti in 1804. Robert Farris Thompson

refers to Vodou as “a vibrant, sophisticated synthesis of the traditional religions of Dahomey, Yorubaland, and Kongo with an infusion of Roman Catholicism... *Africa reblended*” (1983: 163). Karen McCarthy Brown explains, “Slaves in the New World reground the lens of their religion...spirits they brought with them from Africa shifted and realigned in response to their needs. Some were forgotten; others given a centrality they never had in the homeland” (1991:89-100). This process has continued with Haitian migrants to Cuba, whose Vodú practice reflect differences from those in Haiti or Haitian diasporas elsewhere and the evolution continues. Kate Ramsey insightfully observes that “Regional variations as well as differences in rural, urban, and diasporic religious organization, ritual, and nomenclature complicate attempts to generalize about Vodou translocally as much as transhistorically (2011:7), Nonetheless, I have found that there are notable differences between Vodou in Haiti and Vodú in Cuba about which we can make some generalizations, as I explore in this section.<sup>151</sup>

Some of the differences in practice may reflect processes occurring during the peak time period when most Haitian laborers arrived in Cuba: around the First World War and throughout the 1920s. Although it is not a museum of antique Vodú, I believe that Cuban practices exhibit characteristics that point to a period when Vodou in Haiti was more family-based and less temple-oriented than it is today.

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<sup>151</sup> I base my discussion on knowledge of Vodú practice in Cuba compared with my observations of Vodou events in Haiti during visits between 2002 and 2009, and my participation in Vodou events hosted by Haitian immigrants in New York City and Boston. Since 2005, I have been a regular guest at *fet lwa* hosted by Maude Marie Evans Charles, a Haitian *mambo* living in Boston, with a basement temple in the neighborhood of Mattapan. To my knowledge, there are no publications other than this dissertation comparing Cuban Vodú with contemporary Haitian Vodou based on ethnographic fieldwork. Researchers from the Casa del Caribe proposed a project, “*el triangulo del Vodú*” (the Vodou triangle) comparing Vodou in three locations: Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic (a nation with a large Haitian diaspora) but not been able to secure funds for travel and research. While authors of *el Vodú en Cuba* touch on differences in practice between the two islands, their comparisons were based on information available in the classic ethnographies by Price-Mars (1928), Deren (1953), Métraux (1959), and Courlander (1960), and on conversations with Haitian scholars who visited Cuba including Guérin Montilus, Laënnec Hurbon and Rachel Beauvoir- Dominique (Alexis Alarcón, personal conversations 2008-2013).

During much of the nineteenth century, Haiti was internationally isolated and diplomatically shunned by neighboring countries whose leaders could not imagine the legitimacy of an independent black republic. It was not until 1860, when the Haitian government finally signed a concordat with Rome, that Haiti began to receive Catholic priests in the country after a gap of almost two generations. However, African-inspired belief systems were by then deeply ingrained in the lifeways of the majority of the population, although customs and the religious lexicon varied regionally (Geggus 1991, Mintz and Trouillot 1995, Ramsey 2011).

During the early twentieth century, pressured by spreading deforestation and the entry of foreign capital and processes of administrative centralization associated with the U.S. military occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934, peasants increasingly migrated to cities, particularly Port-au-Prince. In *Migration and Vodou* (2005) Karen Richman chronicles the penetration of North American capital and business interests into the Haitian economy during the occupation. As international conglomerates bought up huge tracts of land in Haiti for sugar production, thousands of peasants were forced off their small farms, becoming sharecroppers or wage laborers. The shift from freeholding subsistence agriculture to monetized proletarian wage labor impelled large-scale social and religious change in Haiti. Extended peasant families that had lived on ancestral land plots for generations split up as some members left in search of paying work on large plantations, in cities, or abroad. Because the exodus of laborers left fewer family members at home to tend the ancestral shrines, a need arose for a new class of specialized ritual experts who could propitiate the spirits on behalf of fragmented families and distant migrant laborers. The rural and kin-based veneration of inherited spirits on ancestral land began to shift towards a temple-based creed that was more hierarchical, with an initiated priesthood replacing the family patriarch or matriarch as ritual specialist, and a cadre of initiated helpers, known as

*ounsi*, assisting the priest. Religious practices were monetized, as specialists charged for their services and for initiations (Richman 2005:116-124, see also McCarthy Brown 1991:29, 136-139).

The Haitian laborers seeking work in Cuban cane fields during the early decades of the twentieth century voyaged during a period when Vodou practice in Haiti was undergoing change. Many came from rural areas where religious tradition was just beginning to shift from a family-based praxis to a system characterized by a trained priesthood and differentiated levels of initiation. Based on my fieldwork observations, most ritual leaders of Cuban Vodú today, like their rural Haitian ancestors, serve spirits they describe as inherited from specific forebears, and most did not undergo an elaborate initiation process. Instead, they learned how to heal clients, propitiate the spirits, conduct rituals, and host festivities for the deities from a family elder, often their father, uncle, or grandfather.

An interview I conducted with *oungan* Pablo Milanés on March 14, 2009 illustrates this process:

Pablo Milanés: Well, I carry the Vodú of my dad and my grandfather when they came. The old Haitian ways, they taught me the old ways.

Grete Viddal: Were there others besides your father and grandfather who taught you the secrets of Vodú?

Pablo Milanés: Well, these are family things. The saints [*luá*] are from my grandfather and grandmother in Haiti. My father gave me his final secrets in the last days before his death.

Grete Viddal: You are one of the few descendants who has visited Haiti, you've been there twice. Did anything surprise you?

Pablo Milanés: Yes, the songs that my Gran Buá sings now are no longer heard in Haiti, no longer exist. The youth have not learned it. That's what we want here, to keep the old Vodú.

Grete Viddal: Like what songs?

Pablo Milanés: [Sings a song] ...You don't hear this in Haiti anymore.

Alexis Alarcón told me that at the time he conducted the bulk of his field research for *el Vodú en Cuba* in the 1980s, Cuban Vodú lacked a highly systematized initiation ritual. The *lave tet*, or “headwashing,” a several-day ritual process of purifying and strengthening the “head,” meaning the seat or abode of the spirit in the body, was typically the religion’s most elaborate personal rite. Antonio Mejias Limonta, however, described a different scenario, explaining that his own initiation as a Vodú priest, undertaken with specialists in the village of Thompson, reflected practices in place since Haitians arrived in Cuba. Lasting nine days, his initiation culminated in the bestowal of the title of *oungan* or priest. He also commented that although his initiation was monetized—in that he paid for the necessary sacrificial animals, food, special clothing, musicians, and other items—the process was nevertheless not as expensive and rigidly structured as initiation into other spiritual systems in Cuba such as Ifá, Santería, or Palo.

While an evolution towards systematized Vodú initiations does seem to be underway in Cuba, it is difficult to pinpoint a time frame and causality. Changes likely reflect both urbanization and the stimulus of other religions of initiation, such as Santería and Palo, which have been spreading from western Cuba into *oriente* for more than a generation.<sup>152</sup> The Cuban Revolution of 1959 resulted in a socialist government that offered new educational and work opportunities to rural dwellers. As a result, people of Haitian descent have increased their presence in towns and cities, including Havana, where they have both been exposed to Santería and Palo, and also have introduced Vodú to Cuban urbanites.

After the colony of Saint-Domingue became Haiti in 1804, many former slaves headed for the hills, leaving plantations behind and establishing their own subsistence farms (Mintz and Trouillot 1995, DuBois 2004:193, Richman 2005:52). Vodou developed in the context of an

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<sup>152</sup> See Wirtz (2007) for an analysis of the introduction of Santería into Santiago in the mid-twentieth century, also Schmidt (2006) and Viarnes (2007).



independent peasantry. In Cuba, slavery did not end until 1886. In the meantime, belief systems such as Santería and the various branches of Palo took shape in *cabildos de nación*, the urban mutual aid societies of African ethnic groups (Portuondo Zúñiga 2000, de la Fuente 2001:161, Moore 2006:310). After slavery, Cuban blacks continued to form mutual aid and recreation societies based on ethnic identification, occupations, and musical interests. So, while Vodou coalesced during the nineteenth century among peasants in rural areas, Afro-Cuban practices such as Santería and Palo developed in the context of societies or associations, generally located in towns and cities. As such, they were molded in an environment more comparable to a congregation or temple than a rural family compound.

Cuban Vodú may reflect those practices most common in the regions that migrant workers came from. In the early years of migration, around the First World War, cities and towns in the south of Haiti predominated, although in the later 1920s, workers also came from the north (Casey 2012:80-85). Asking Haitian descendants about the areas in Haiti from which their parent or grandparent came, I heard southern towns such as Aux Cayes, Torbeck, Cavallion, and Saint-Luis du Sud mentioned over and over. Furthermore, most of the *braceros* were from peasant backgrounds, although some had spent time in cities or in the military before migrating abroad (Casey 2012:100-106). Their religious practices therefore likely reflected styles and mores common among the rural population.

The role of seminal or pivotal figures in the spread of religious practices is also an important factor to consider. James, Millet, and Alarcón observed that during their fieldwork in the 1980s, Vodú in Cuba was dominated by a few prominent ritual specialists, particularly Tomás Poll Sr. (nicknamed “el yeneral” meaning “the general”) and Nicolas Casal (2007:107).<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Nicolas Casal remains so revered that during a performance by Grupo Folklórico Thompson in 2009, members sang an ode to him.

Both Poll and Casal traveled throughout eastern Cuba, visiting godchildren and clients, conducting rituals, and overseeing the organization of spirit parties held by less experienced *mambos* and *oungans*. While there were various prominent ritual specialists in Cuba, such as Titina in Las Tunas province and the Milanés brothers in Pilon del Cauto, the authors of *el Vodú en Cuba* conjecture that Vodú practice in Cuba was heavily influenced by the concerns and styles of Poll and Casal (2007:107).

Tomás Poll Sr.'s daughter Ana Rosa Poll Lay explained to me that her father worked with "101 saints," which he had brought with him to Cuba from Saint-Louis-du-Sud in Haiti.<sup>154</sup> Among the most important were a spirit called Zondon (also sometimes spelled Jondon or Gondon), and another named Yigondel or Yivondel, both belonging to the *rada* order of "white" spirits who dine indoors on a tile or cement floor, never outside on the ground. The latter *luá* is served the meat of a rodent called *curiel*, and Ana Rosa notes that this was an adaptation her father had to make in Cuba. In Haiti, this spirit would be offered a bull or calf, but since sacrificing bovines is prohibitively difficult in Cuba, another food had to be substituted. Since many other spirits eat pig or goat, a different animal was needed in order to differentiate Yigondel/ Yivondel. The large meaty rodent called a *curiel* was the best solution, and Poll Sr.'s adaptation eventually became the spirit's preferred food.

As late as the 1980s, most religious leaders in *haitiano-cubano* communities were Haitian-born elders. Many of these *oungans* and *mambos* had practiced in Haiti before coming to Cuba. By the end of the 1990s, most of this generation had passed away. With the death of the nucleus of spiritual elders born in Haiti and the aging of the first generation, there has been a

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<sup>154</sup> Interview February 16, 2010. References to quantities such as "101" or "404" are often a metaphor for "a lot" within the Haitian descendant community.

process of change, and some norms of Vodú practice have been shifting, particularly during the past two decades (Alarcón and Corbea n.d.).

Festivities for the *luá* are often organized to coincide with important saint's days in Cuba, particularly those commonly celebrated by Cuban Spiritists, such as Saint Barbara's Day on December 4<sup>th</sup> and Saint Lazarus' Day on December 17<sup>th</sup>. In contemporary Haiti, All Souls' Day or the "Day of the Dead" on November 1<sup>st</sup>, known on the island as Fèt Gede, is by far the most widely celebrated folk holiday (Smith 2012). Haitians gather by the thousands at graves and in cemeteries to honor their deceased kinfolk and their ancestors. The occasion is less solemn than ribald and carnivalesque, since the Gede, the coterie of spirits that preside in the cemetery, are lascivious and bawdy, overseeing not only death but also fertility. In my observation, in Vodou temples of the Haitian diaspora in Boston and New York, Fèt Gede is also typically the grandest and most anticipated spirit party of the year. Other key saint's days in contemporary Haiti are celebrations for the Virgin of Mount Carmel, associated with Ezili Freyda, at the waterfalls of Sodo on July 16<sup>th</sup> and Saint James the Apostle's Day (Sen Jak in Haitian Creole), associated with the Ogun warrior spirits, on July 25<sup>th</sup>. In Cuba, on the other hand, I have seen no Vodú communities devote a special party to the Gede, and while Ecili and Ogun are celebrated, the ritual calendar is different.

Instead, the influence of Spiritism, or *espiritismo*, is particularly strong, and notably so in *oriente*. Saint Barbara and Saint Lazarus are revered, whether from the point of view of Spiritism, Catholicism, Vodú, Santería, Palo, or the large swath of the population that sees no contradiction in mixing these faith systems. In the city of Santiago, members of the Templo San Benito de Palermo, an historic sanctuary and house temple founded by Reynerio Pérez, a foundational religious leader credited with bringing Santería and Palo to Santiago in the early

twentieth century (Larduet 2001, Wirtz 2007:53-56) parade a statue of Saint Barbara through the streets of the city on December 4<sup>th</sup>. Citizens emerge from their doors to sprinkle the statue with cologne as she passes or to toast her with wine. Many have carefully color coordinated their outfits in an homage to Changó, the warrior spirit of the Santería pantheon with whom Saint Barbara is associated, whose symbolic colors are red and white.



Figure 39 – Procession for Saint Barbara through the streets of Santiago – ©Viddal 2009

In the villages of Thompson, Barrancas, Pilon del Cauto, and Ramon de Guaninao, the towns of Palma Soriano, Contramaestre, and Las Tunas, and in the city of Santiago, I noted that

*haitiano-cubanos* coordinated *fet luá* to fall on or near the saint’s days of Saint Barbara and Saint Lazarus. The famous *oungan* Tomás Poll Sr.’s daughters Ana Rosa and Blanca sponsor biennial multi-day spirit parties that honor Vodú deities and Santa Bárbara and San Lazaro on alternating days. Blanca keeps larger-than-life-sized statues of each saint in her living room, generously supplying both with newly stitched clothing each year, including a red satin cape and crown for Saint Barbara and a purple satin robe and hat for Saint Lazarus. *Mambo* Elena Sansón in Santiago also had massive statues of both saints crafted for her consulting room and brought



Figure 40 – Blanca Poll’s Saint Lazarus statue – ©Viddal 2010

them out for Vodú as well as Spiritist celebrations.

The sway of Spiritism in eastern Cuba is profound and Vodú coexists within its circle of influence. A doctrine promulgated by French educator and philosopher Allan Kardec, Spiritism gained adherents in Europe, North America, and Latin America in the second half of the

nineteenth century, arriving in Cuba in the 1860s.<sup>155</sup> Historian Reinaldo Román explains that Kardec’s writings first became popular among the middle classes, where they were associated with modernizing and “scientific” tendencies to investigate paranormal phenomena and examine the power of the human mind and the supernatural (2007:32-35). “Spiritists kept company with

<sup>155</sup> Born Hypolite Léon Denizard Rivail, Kardec adopted the name Allan Kardec, believing it had been his name in a past life (see Román 2007:32-33).

masons, freethinkers, and liberals” comments Román, and saw themselves as a “cosmopolitan vanguard poised to bring forth a new age,” armed with empirical tools for studying the spiritual world (2007:107). Kardec believed that incorporeal beings and spirits both ancient and recently deceased could be contacted through mediumship. His books explain how to receive advice and council from these “celestial brethren” by contacting them through séances, referred to a *misas* by Spiritists in Cuba (Román 2007:108). Kardec’s ideas spread to the rural poor and marginal urban classes, where many people of African descent were open to tenets that resonated with the metaphysics of ancestor veneration and trance possession (Román 2007:32-34).

In Cuba today, *espiritismo* takes various forms, including *espiritismo cruzado*, a “crossed” or “mixed” variety, which blends practices from Santería and other African-inspired systems with Spiritism. The faith is particularly attractive to many Cubans because mediumship is “natural” and does not require an initiation process (Viarnés 2007, Espirito Santo 2011).

*Espiritistas* incur no expensive fee for initiation and need not employ a cadre of paid musicians for events; instead, they sing hymns from Kardec’s books or assorted Spiritist hymnals. Altars and accouterments are relatively inexpensive: bowls or glasses of water, flowers, photos of deceased kin, plaster statues of saints or mythical figures such as Plains Indians or Gypsies. This makes *espiritismo* a particularly accessible practice, and one that in Cuba often melds with other creeds, including folk Catholicism and African-rooted practices.

Even an *oungan* such as Pablo Milanés, who affirms that he serves the Vodú spirits in the manner of his father and grandfather from Haiti, has been shaped by local customs. He maintains a typical Spiritist “stair-step” style altar of little shelves populated by plaster statues of saints, glasses of water, and flowers, flanking his characteristically Haitian altars on flat tables and on the ground. In Cueto, I saw *mambo* Rafaela sing a Spiritist hymn to open communication with

her Vodú spirits, which shifted into a chant for the *luá* (“*Oh misionero, mi misionero...*” [from a Spiritist hymn in Spanish] to “*Ele papa Zaka ou timoun la ye...*” [from a Vodú song in Haitian Creole]).<sup>156</sup>

Santería has become a reference point for practitioners of other religions in Cuba, due to its connections to the folklore industry, tourism, and its status as a symbol of Afro-Cuban culture. Its codes and lexicon have penetrated Vodú, and *haitiano-cubanos* will often use words like *santero* and *santera* (terms generally associated, respectively, with male and female initiates in Santería) in lieu of *oungan* and *mambo* to make themselves more intelligible to the general population.

While rural settings are still the primary area of preservation of Vodú, the religion is spreading to cities including Havana. Both Tato and Pablo Milanés both have spiritual godchildren in the capital and visit them annually. Also, the migration of *haitiano-cubanos* to larger towns and cities is bringing the religion to urban areas. For example, members of Los Misterios del Vodú, the folkloric dance troupe founded by José Gabriel Spret in Santiago, moved to Havana in the mid-2000s in search of better economic opportunities. As described in Chapter Three, Los Misterios have linked forces with Nancy Pulles, a Havana-based priestess of Santería, and current Los Misterios director Silvia Gardes is training Pulles in Vodú.

During an interview on interview March 4, 2010, Alexis Alarcón underscored the changes occurring today:

Vodú in Havana is a novelty. It is spreading by way of the dance groups [that move to Havana], or descendants who marry Cubans. They are expanding the root, making new branches that gradually sprout leaves. That’s what’s happening to Vodú, and that’s why we can now talk of a real Cuban Vodú. This new Vodú is currently reaching even Havana, but it is not the same Vodú as in the 1940’s. Already Spanish is used more than Haitian Creole. Really, Creole is now used to create mystery, to emphasize the difference between the expert and the client, to

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<sup>156</sup> Recorded on July 29, 2006.

show that it [Vodú] comes from afar. But when I recommend the ritual baths and cures I have to say things in Spanish. Vodú has been gaining new adherents...

While Vodou in Cuba is still generally *led* by descendants of Haitians, the inclusion of Cubans not of Haitian descent in Vodú rituals means there are now many believers whose multi-faceted practices include the *luá*. While the participation of Cubans as clients of Haitian ritual specialists has occurred since the *braceros* arrival in the early twentieth century, the process of mixture continues, particularly with the passing of the Haitian-born elders.

Today, although a very few Cubans of color may still have knowledge of a Lucumi great-grandmother or a Congo great-great grandfather, neither Santería nor Palo use ethnicity as a marker of authenticity. While they are *racially* marked (despite the participation of Cubans of various colors) as “Black” religions, they are no longer *ethnically* marked. Unlike Santería and Palo, Vodú is still associated with a particular ethnic group: Haitians. But this is changing. Cubans not of Haitian descent are becoming clients and godchildren of *oungans* and *mambos*, and entering Haitian cultural contexts and spaces.

Even the lexicon is being affected. Overall, there has been a loss of Creole, even as a ritual language, in some families, substituted with Spanish and other Afro-Cuban religious terms. Few third and fourth generation descendants speak Haitian Creole fluently, and there is now a necessity for “translators” between *mambos*, *oungans* and their clients. I witnessed translators step in during rituals when elder believers, mounted by the Creole-speaking deities, offered advice to participants. For example, at a Vodú party I attended in the town of Cueto, Marianna, the daughter of a *mambo*, Rafaela (a *pichona* whose parents were born in Haiti). became mounted by Ogun Balendio. Marianna is a third generation descendant, and she speaks some Creole. So does her Ogun. However, when Rafaela’s granddaughter Noyleida also became



possessed by Ogun, a translator was needed for the two Oguns to communicate with each other.

On the theme of Vodú ritual language, Alarcón quipped: “People say, in Cuba, the *luá* must learn to speak Spanish.”<sup>157</sup>

A movement has begun to learn Haitian Creole in classroom settings. In Havana, Hilario Batista, a professional translator and journalist who is the founder of Bannzil Kiba Kreyol, an organization devoted to promoting Creole language and culture in Cuba, regularly teaches classes. He mentioned to me that many of his students are descendants who want to re-connect with their roots. Others are folklore performers, or spiritual godchildren of Vodú elders.

In addition to gradual linguistic separation, the attributes and importance of some *luá* differ between the two islands. As mentioned earlier, Gran Buá is more prominent in Cuba than Haiti. Also, Èzili Dantò is a widely worshipped spirit in Haiti but hardly known in Cuba. When Vodouists refer to Ecili in Cuba, they generally mean Ecili Freyda, the spirit known for her love of luxury, fine food and drink, and the care she takes in her toilette. Although James, Millet, and Alarcón mention that during fieldwork in Las Tunas they encountered a “red Ecili,” a *petró* version, also called “Ecili with red eyes” or Ezili Yeux-Rouge, a fierce, furious, and impoverished goddess, this spirit is uncommon in Cuba (2007:170-171). Kouzen Zaka, a deity envisioned as a hardworking peasant, is focal in Haiti and among Haitians in Boston and New York, but no one in Cuba dedicates a party specifically to this agricultural deity, as Maude Marie Evans Charles does in Boston every May. Damballa (also spelled Danbala), a divine being associated with wisdom and purity, has also transformed in Cuba. According to Alarcón, while in Haiti he is not a warrior, the Haitians who migrated to Cuba had a hard life. They had to dominate the machete, the torch, and agriculture. Alarcón notes that Damballa, a calm spirit in

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<sup>157</sup> Conversation September 28, 2008.

Haiti, “has more bravura” in Cuba and “handles machetes.”<sup>158</sup> Joel James and Alexis Alarcón coined a term for the importance of Ogun and other warrior spirits in Cuban Vodú, calling it “Ogunismo,” and noting that many Catholic saints revered in Cuba, such as San Pedro (Saint Peter), San Jorge (Saint George), and Santiago del Apostol (Saint James) are all associated with *caminos* or paths of Ogun in Cuban Vodú (Alarcón 1988, also personal conversation November 5, 2008).

## Conclusion

Sociologist Alex Stepick argues in *Pride Against Prejudice* (1998) that Haitian immigrants in the United States mobilize pride as a resource in the struggle to overcome bigotry in their new home, explaining that in dealing with prejudice and discrimination, “most Haitians turn to the internal strengths of their culture” (1998:75). They evoke the Haiti that unleashed the world’s only successful slave revolution, the first free Black republic, and use music, art, religion, and language to fight for dignity. Likewise, in Cuba, *haitiano-cubanos* use cultural resources to embody their self-respect and create meaningful engagements with the larger Cuban society of which they are a part. They make use of both the ferocious and the gracious to make an impression upon Cuban society, and also to manifest their own visions of themselves as both powerful and refined.

In comparing Haitian Vodou and Cuban Vodú, we find that the Cuban variant is marked by the people who brought it, the time period in which they lived, their rural status, and the particular ritual specialists who arrived, their background and the spirits that they considered important. Later, processes of adaptation in Cuba include contact with other Cuban religious forms, the dynamics of migration to urban spaces, Haitian Creole losing ground as a spoken

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<sup>158</sup> Conversation with Alexis Alarcón on November 5, 2008

language (although there is a revival movement), and differences in the significance of key deities. A new transnational variant of Vodú has rooted in Cuba, and continues to expand and adapt on new soil.

## Conclusion

Exploring Cuba's unheralded Haitian heritage can help us learn more about the agency of migrants and their descendants in the formation of public culture and the role of performance as a vector of both local and national identification. Although research focusing on the expressive arts and spiritual belief systems of Havana and western Cuba is relatively abundant, the cultural forms brought to eastern Cuba by migrants from Haiti remain largely unexamined. I explore the role played by festivals and public performance in the preservation and renovation of *haitiano-cubano* arts, and examine how performers, in the context of valorizing their cultural identity, negotiate local, national, and international contexts and relations.

Today the continuation of Haitian customs is no longer linked with isolation, but instead with performances and festivals, with research centers and academia, and with international music promoters and tourism. "Folklore" is a valuable currency that differentiates Cuba from other island destinations, attracts tourists and culture promoters, touts the socialist regime's racial and ethnic integration, and demonstrates the state's ability to provide citizens with a civic life replete with arts and culture. Members of troupes consider folkloric performance an opportunity to express pride and valorize formerly denigrated traditions. In the context of folkloric performance, heritage festivals, and tourism, Vodú has become "chic" in communist Cuba. Performing in folklore festivals also brings rural artists into contact with promoters and agents and foreign aficionados of music and dance, helping them potentially access resources in a difficult economy.

Scholars, cultural activists, performers, and ritual specialists have helped me understand the trajectory of official attitudes towards the cultural contributions of Cubans of Haitian heritage and the interwoven relationships between communities, performers, and state entities. My contacts helped me understand how *haitiano-cubanos* have or have not been formally integrated into national identity, as well as how their cultural practices have been officially studied, ignored, discouraged, funded, or veiled by policy makers. I examine the initiatives directed at creating and funding folkloric dance performance, festivals, and events that privilege eastern Cuba's legacy in order to analyze the role played by public performance in the evolution of *haitiano-cubano* identification.

People of Haitian descent in Cuba negotiate varied categories of belonging as they proclaim and perform both their Haitianness and their Cubanness. Many express deep appreciation for and loyalty towards the ideals of the Cuban revolution. At the same time, in the context of a communist state that has pursued policies repressing religious practice, openly sharing, demonstrating, and promoting Vodú in contexts funded and organized by the state illustrates the density of the "folkloric imaginary" in Cuba, and the complex relationship of national identity to black Atlantic spirituality and traditions. As an ethnic minority clustered in a region considered far from the nation's center of power, people of Haitian heritage in Cuba are using their distinctive performance traditions to challenge the hegemony of the capital as the locus of the production of national folklore, and inserting their voices into national and international dialogues. The entrance of *haitiano-cubano* performance into the public eye in Cuba both supports and challenges national ideologies. As Haitian descendants in Cuba showcase their traditions, they transform the formerly abject into a resource, both for themselves and for the nation.

## Epilogue: New Developments and Shifting Futures

In 2008, already absent from the limelight for almost two years while battling an undisclosed illness, Fidel Castro, at the time the longest reigning head of state in the world, officially retired from office, leaving his younger brother Raul Castro in his place. After almost half century as the paramount force of the Cuban regime, the elder Castro's departure transpired quietly. However, the nation for which Raul Castro took over leadership faced serious economic challenges and an increasingly restive and exasperated citizenry. Cuba had never really recovered from the economic collapse that followed the loss of subsidies and fiscal support triggered by the demise of the Soviet Union almost two decades earlier. Shortages of consumer goods, low salaries, the high price of food and fuel, a severe housing deficit, and crumbling infrastructure and public transportation punctuated daily life on the island, as pundits and journalists abroad predicted a potential mutiny of the population.

But after half a century of Fidel Castro's micromanagement of nearly all aspects of policy and administration, the new chief executive Raul Castro inaugurated a series of cautious yet profound restructurings of the socialist system, circumspectly referred to by the government as "updates" rather than "reforms." For the first time, in March of 2008, Cuban residents were allowed to purchase cell phone accounts, computers, DVD players, and microwave ovens. It became permissible to mix with foreign tourists in state-run hotels and resorts, which no longer barred Cubans from entry as long as they had the funds to patronize such establishments. Starting in 2010, the Communist Party began to embrace decentralization and experiment with allowing limited economic entrepreneurship. New categories of self-employment were approved, and

permits and licenses for small business owners became easier to obtain. Cubans reacted with wary but keen enthusiasm, with tens of thousands making the shift and becoming *cuentapropistas*, or self-employed. For example, a Lexington Institute report confirms that the number of licensed entrepreneurs grew 153 percent between late 2010 and early 2012.<sup>159</sup> Cooperative farmers markets, in which agricultural producers were permitted to sell directly to buyers without state intermediaries, began to alleviate a portion of the bottlenecks in food distribution. In November 2011, it became legal to buy and sell automobiles and homes for the first time since the Revolution. The ability to sell an apartment or house, in order to move elsewhere or to create capital for a business start-up, allowed for increased self-determination and more autonomy from the state as the sole supplier of housing and employment. In October of 2012, the much-detested *carta blanca*, or special permission card from the Cuban government for travel abroad, was eliminated, allowing Cubans who wished to visit other countries and who obtained the appropriate visas the right to travel at will. Philip Peters, Cuba policy expert for the Lexington Institute, observes that the Cuban government faces a challenge in “the act of letting go: letting go of 50-year habits and practices, letting go of the compulsion to plan and direct as much economic activity as possible, letting go of control over private economic matters, letting go of aversion to markets, and letting go of attitudes that stigmatize private initiative and citizens who engage in it” (2012).

The Cuban administration also began to retract from providing the full scope of social services and entitlements to which citizens had been accustomed for five decades. Many workplaces and schools no longer provided meals. The government scaled back distribution of uniforms, other supplies, and the perks and prizes such as appliances and home goods long

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<sup>159</sup> Source: Phillip Peters, “A chronology of Cuba’s economic reform” published by the Lexington Institute, Arlington Virginia, May 2012.

associated with workplace performance. Many items were eliminated from the *libreta*, or monthly ration book, which no longer covers basic food provisions or requisites such as soap, detergent, and cooking oil.

The poorest sectors of society have been the most adversely affected by cutbacks, while many of the restructurings initially benefited urbanites with access to remittances from abroad and others with higher than typical incomes. Most Cubans did not have the start up capital to open a successful business, buy a bigger home, or patronize a tourist hotel. But I noticed that people with very modest incomes and those living in rural areas were following the changes closely. As building materials became more accessible, I began to see new construction even in remote villages. As the regime began to support rather than crack down on micro-capitalist activity and champion rather than denounce nascent entrepreneurial efforts, the change in attitude from authorities and shift in social climate emboldened many to venture into tiny enterprises, such as cooking and selling food or the production or repair of apparel and small items. While Cubans from all spheres had long engaged in micro-enterprises such as selling sweets or toasted peanuts on the street, tailoring and shoe repair, or vending garden produce informally, phases of overlooking unregulated activities would be followed by periods of black market crackdowns, fines, and confiscations. I heard *haitiano-cubanos* in rural areas and cities alike talk openly about trying small ventures. Also, with the official approval of drum and dance instructors as a legal category of employment, members of folkloric troupes hoped to make connections with foreigners at festivals or during touristic performances, and legally market themselves as instructors without fear of penalty.

Specifically in Santiago, Cuba's second largest city, broad changes have occurred since I finished the bulk of my fieldwork. In 2010, a new First Secretary of the Party took over Santiago



province: Lázaro Éxposito. Santiago and Guantánamo were long considered Cuba's poorest and most-neglected provinces. Éxposito was successful in nearby Granma province in revitalizing its largest town (Bayamo) and surrounds. Santiago, long associated with its sizzling summer carnival, musical population, and picturesque narrow colonial streets, had also been infamous for its antiquated water mains, the disrepair of thoroughfares, decrepit schools, deficient public services, notorious shortages of consumer goods, and lack of public leisure activities. Éxposito was sent to Santiago to root out inefficiency, overcome stagnation, and oversee upgrades to infrastructure, services, shopping, and entertainment. Considered a reformer, his changes have been enormously popular. Road repairs have been carried out and streetlights and public telephones installed in many neighborhoods. The pedestrian shopping street has been brightened with paint, signage, trash receptacles, and public toilets. Most popular of all are the new markets, bakeries, street vendors, and cafeterias selling in *moneda nacional*, the currency in which the Cuban workforce is paid (rather than the *divisas* or hard currency stand-in that circulates in the tourist economy). With the legalization and licensing of food cart vendors, I found locals delighted about being able to buy a sandwich or an ice cream in the park or grab an affordable lunch at kiosks along busy streets.

At the Casa del Caribe, Orlando Vergés—who assumed directorship of the Casa del Caribe after Joel James passed away in 2006—has been a well-liked leader and under his management the Festival del Caribe continues. With Éxposito's local reforms and national processes of decentralization, the Casa del Caribe recently gained a new level of autonomy. As of 2013, the institute operates independently from the Provincial Ministry of Culture. The Casa can now seek international donors and accept funding from abroad, co-produce events with

outside organizations and NGOs, and has inaugurated its own academic press to produce translations and new titles.

Opportunities are on the horizon in a nation experimenting with a more open brand of socialism that allows for expanded individual choice and autonomy. Dancers, drummers, Vodú believers, anthropologists, festival organizers, and other dreamers, including those of *haitiano-cubano* origin, may find new visions can come to fruition in twenty-first century Cuba.

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