

Dancing & Being:
Timba Music, Contested Spaces, and the Performance of Identity in Cuba

by

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To all the ancestors,
especially Gaudy and Louise Brooks, Ora Kingsbury,
Beatrice Goodwin, and Henry D. Vaughan.

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Prologue

Let me explain just why these words exist, *el por qué* of my travels in Cuba to do anthropology and this book that has been born because of it. As I embarked many questioned why I would expose myself to what seemed to them a dangerous situation in a “far away”, “communist”, “poor”, “Third World” country, and for such a long time. I especially recall the playful, yet serious teasing of my grandfather who would say, “We want you to be done with Cuba so you can hurry up and get a job! Don’t fool around and can’t get back!” And also the tears of a very special soul whom I scorned by choosing Havana over the home we had made together. As in the Buena Vista fever that took hold of the U.S. and the Elian fiasco that brought the island into view as well, perceptions of Cuba are made of fear and fantasy. Somehow I wasn’t ever afraid. Not that I was brave, either, the hysteria had just never reached me. People of the African Diaspora who travel and dwell throughout its many frontiers and folk need to tell their stories. Through these encounters much can be learned to advance anthropological theory, improve living conditions, and expand life opportunities for people of the diaspora in various contexts from local to global. Too often, as with Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, or St. Clair Drake the work gets lost somehow, never finding its way into the canon of anthropology or the consciousness of would-be readers. I wanted to tell our stories so that everyone could hear.

In 1996 I was a senior art major at Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA. I had just returned from a year abroad in Italy, and was very interested in the idea of diaspora: the dispersed, diverse, transculturated unity of a people. I was considering taking on a minor

degree in Spanish. Just then my mother, a choreographer and closet anthropologist (she is a protégée of Ruth Beckford whose mentor was Katherine Dunham) traveled to Cuba to experience Afro-Cuban culture. She was drawn especially to the music and dance of the Yoruba or *lucumí*¹, the *arará*², and the *carabali*³, descendants of enslaved Africans. She also saw hybrid forms like rumba *guaguancó*⁴, *danzón*⁵ and *timba* which fuse African and Spanish culture and express the inherent tensions between these two poles of Cuban identity and heritage. She returned with stories, richly textured paintings, video tapes, and photographs, all of which I would eventually see. But because I was away in Atlanta I would have to wait. In the meantime all that arrived to me was an audiocassette with a postcard (see Figs. 9.0, 9.1). The postcard shows several emblems of Changó, the brash Yoruba *orisha*⁶ of thunder, rain, and fertility in the form of male potency. There is a red and white miniature castle where the deity lives, crowned with a double ax and a leather belt lined with cowry shells, which were money in old Yoruba land. At Changó's feet lies an embroidered pillow on which rests an *achere*, small gourd rattle, which beckons us to shake it and salute the king. The tape contained the music of a bold entertainer El

¹Word used in Cuba to refer to Yoruba language and culture as preserved on the island.

²Refers to Ewe/Fon culture (taken from the areas of present-day Togo and Ghana) as preserved by enslaved Africans and their descendants in Cuba.

³ Refers to the culture of the Calabar region (from the southeastern region of the present-day nation-state of Nigeria) as preserved in Cuba—mostly in the form of a male secret society called Abakuá.

⁴ Rumba is a song and dance genre born from the mix of African and Spanish culture, with the African element predominating. It was born in urban centers and semi-rural areas near sugar refineries. Its main instruments are conga drums (*tumbadoras*) or boxes (*cajones*), which are played percussively. Rumba also refers to a collective non-religious celebration. Rumba *guaguancó* is the most widely played of several rumba styles. In the dance *guaguancó* features a suggestive interplay between male-female pairs in a game of attraction, flirtatious pursuit, and rejection that peaks when the male dancer thrusts in a gesture of sexual possession, called the *vacunao* (vaccination), which the female attempts to avoid or block (Orovio 1992: 429-32).

⁵ A ballroom music and dance genre in 2/4 meter, derived as a Cuban interpretation of the French contredanse. Instrumentation included two violins, piano, violin, clarinet or flute, double-bass, Cuban pailas (timbales) and a güiro (Alén 1999: 121-131). In the dance groups of several couples traced figures. The first was said to be composed in 1879 by Miguel Failde. It has a clear African-Caribbean lilt, but the African element is not as pronounced as in rumba.

⁶Orishas are deities or Gods of the Yoruba people from southwest Nigeria. They represent the forces of nature, deified ancestors, and cultural heroes. I am using the English spelling as opposed to “oricha” as used in Spanish.

Médico de la Salsa⁷ who claimed to be el Rey (the king) of Cuba's music scene, his sound having taken the island by storm and made history. I began to read about Changó and the complex, resilient Yoruba/lucumí religious system of which he is emblematic. Changó is king of the drum, virility, fire, a powerful magician, and master dancer. He is the owner of the gift of gab, and the ceremonies of his cult were the blueprint for all Yoruba priesthoods in the New World. Like Changó, El Médico's tongue of fire brought him success and strife. He was often in conflict with enemies that sought to destroy him, in the end fleeing, condemned by some as a coward, still revered by others as king, remembered forever by all. Yoruba practice in Trinidad and Tobago is called Shango, and in Cuba, along with the sweet seductive orisha Ochun, Changó represents the personality of Cuba and symbolizes Yoruba culture there.

The music was just as overwhelming. I loved the roundness of the words and their proximity to African language. Ever since being among the Senegalese merchants and their Wolof in Italy I had wanted to know an African tongue. Cuban Spanish felt close to that, like an intermediate step toward home. *Alabao, to' e' mundo, ekelekuá, ahínamá, asere, monina, bonkoso, chequendengue, aché, maferefun, moforibale*. Cuban Spanish is Africa in your mouth⁸ (Ortiz 1924; Cabrera 1986; Santiesteban 1997). I listened constantly to the tape and began to experiment with dancing on the local salsa scene. Immediately I perceived a clear difference between El Médico's rhythm and the music from New York, Puerto Rico, Colombia, and other Latin-American nations, that played in the clubs and had been the norm for me. I determined to get my Spanish in shape and used the tape as a study tool, gradually discovering the ways Cuban Spanish, a language all its own, differed from what I had known all my life. I had to go to Havana,

⁷Manuel González Hernández (b. 1965). He is discussed more below, especially in chapters three, five, and nine.

⁸Havanans of all classes and races swallow syllables and consonants and blur the distinctions between their *rs* and *ls* and even *ds*. Linguists trace this characteristic accent to the Andalusian Spanish of the original settlers as modified by the difference between the consonant sounds of West African languages and Romance ones (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 50). Ortiz 1924 and Cabrera 1986 are glossaries of African languages spoken in Cuba, and borrowed from by creolized Cuban Spanish.

where this music was made. I had to know more about the language—both speech and movement, dance and spirit.

By the time I made it to Havana in search of El Médico, I was accompanied and hosted by a great friend, a dancer who a few years earlier had moved from Havana to my neighborhood in Oakland. During the summer of 1996 around the corner from my house he presented a free workshop on Afrocuban folkloric dance every Sunday morning. The whole community gathered, and there was a charged atmosphere of cultural exchange. Later on he invited me to join a dance troupe he had created, called *Obakoso* (Yoruba for “the king did not hang”, a refrain in remembrance and praise of Changó). As our friendship evolved he taught me more about Changó and how to dance to El Médico *a lo cubano*, Cuban style; in exchange I shared what I knew about hip-hop and being a young black man in the United States of America. Moving through Havana City with him I was convinced that I had to be there to learn something, though I was still unsure what.

One afternoon, we went to the neighborhood of Santo Suárez, in the municipality of 10 de Octubre, to celebrate a religious party that marked the end of a yearlong initiation ceremony. There were altars and drums and rum and many people, especially young people my age. Feeling shy I chose to stay outside, where several young men were rapping, beatboxing, poplocking, salsa dancing to El Médico, and playing the dozens. One young man in particular rapped, capped, and danced more than the rest, reminding me of myself and my African-American friends in the Bay. We all smiled at the good natured, swinging fun of the moment, which shifted when they suddenly called us to attention.

“¡Ivan, ven acá!” they yelled. He stopped his dance and quickly entered the house and went into the altar room. There he sat down and was handed the *iyá*, lead drum of the batá⁹ ensemble used in Yoruba/lucumí religious ceremonies in Cuba. Seated beside

⁹Trio of hourglass shaped, double-headed talking drums of the Yoruba people preserved in Cuba.

him was the late, great Pancho Quinto, then one of Havana's oldest and best-known bataleros. After having rapped and danced all the latest styles he began to play a musical liturgy that is hundreds of years old. It was as if the many complicated turns of his salsa steps enclosed and protected ancient information that lived at the center. The incredibly moving prayers he recited with the drum traced patterns that did not so much overshadow the energy and complexity of the salsa, but explained it, being of its foundation, its root. This comfortable, intertwined coexistence of the modern and the ancient captivated me. Ivan struck me as a time traveler, and I wanted to understand how the machine worked.

I traveled many times to Cuba between 1999 and 2002, staying two or three weeks around Christmas and New Years or a few months during the summer welcomed by my friend's mother and officially hosted by Olavo Alén at the Center for the Investigation and Development of Cuban Music or Alberto Granado at La Casa de Africa. This was building familiarity as well as personal and professional connections, working up to a longer stay. Finally, after much dreaming, anticipation, and sacrifice by me and my family, I traveled to Cuba on June 5, 2002 and stayed until September 22, 2003, making only two short visits home.

Upon arriving I spent months trying to establish an official relationship with some research institution that would sponsor me. This way I could obtain a resident visa and remain in Cuba without having to leave every two months and return as a tourist. This would have cost me too much money and made my fieldwork much more difficult, if not impossible. Already funding for research in Cuba was very hard to come by (in fact I did not find any). It was very important to find some organization that would take me on. The Institute of Anthropology was very cordial but unresponsive to my petitions, as was the Juan Marinello Center. The Center for the Investigation of Cuban Music was also unable to extend me a visa though we had a nice relationship from previous visits. La Casa de Africa seemed for a while like my best shot. Its director Alberto Granado suggested that it was a long shot but he might be able to help me. After weeks, with the

expiration date on my visa getting closer, he informed me that La Casa would in fact not be able to do anything for me.

I began preparing to leave the country for Cancún. In a last-ditch effort, Granado took me to meet the directors of La Fundación Fernando Ortiz, Miguel Barnet, Trinidad Pérez, and María Teresa Linares. I talked with them and I believe it was really the latter (La doctorísima or Tete they call her) that pulled strings to have the Foundation take me on as a guest researcher. I am very thankful to her and everyone there—¡Ciencia, conciencia, y paciencia! (Science, conscience, and patience! the organization's motto.)

During this time I truly caught the rhythm of the place; sometimes people refused to believe that I was American and not from Cuba! They say *cubanizao* or *aplataño*¹⁰ about folks who have “become Cuban”. In Havana they thought I was a *guajiro*¹¹ or *palestino*¹² from Oriente. In Oriente they thought I was from some other monte or maybe from the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico.

I watched the telenovelas “la de Cuba y la de Argentina o Brazil”, I laughed with Chivichana and Francella¹³, saw a Cuban interpretation of world politics nightly on la mesa redonda or roundtable, I drank sweet coffee por la mañana, ate caldosa stew on the 26th of July and comida de cajita, the delicious meals in a box found throughout Havana, eché mis sueños al viento en el Malecón¹⁴, I sang to the orishas and learned to play Changó's drums, I rode up close and personal with humanity on the P1 bus and the infamous camello¹⁵, or camel bus, I went from Havana to Santiago by train, I was

¹⁰ Literally “plantained”, it means made Cuban, referring to one of their staple foods.

¹¹ Farmer or country person, also connotes origins outside of Havana, especially from Oriente, the eastern side of Cuba.

¹² Literally Palestinian, refers to Cubans from the eastern part of the island who are illegally resident and/or unwanted in the capital.

¹³ There were usually two soap operas going at any given time, showing on different days, one from Cuba and another from Argentina or Brazil. Chivichana and Francella were popular comedy programs on Cuban television.

¹⁴ I tossed my dreams to the wind at the edge of Havana's sea wall.

¹⁵ Huge passenger buses dragged along by big rigs, implemented in the 1990s to cope with transportation shortages brought on by the fall of the Soviet Bloc.

mistaken for a Rastafarian and a pimp, I signed as a witness in the counting of votes for representatives in the Havana municipality of Marianao. There and in Los Sitios we told stories to pass the time during apagones, or blackouts.

*Fui a buscar los mandados*¹⁶. Family, the grandmother in the home where I lived, died and we grieved. I went to the cockfights with my friend Pedro. I cruised around the perimeter of the U.S. military base in Guantánamo and felt the unity and the power of Cuban patriotism and, dare I say, Revolutionary spirit, as I lifted a bus along with other men, women, and children. I danced with all the best orchestras at clubs, on patios and *balcones* (balconies), at weddings, *cumpleaños* (birthdays) and Carnival and talked with many of their directors, musicians, and fans about music and Cuba.

I have spent much time in Cuba during the last five years and, in spite of being a foreigner, I was rarely a complete outsider. I came with a great friend, my *ecobio*, who helped me and taught me many things about Cuba right from the start, a gesture for which I will always be grateful to him and his family. I am an African person and that too facilitated my connection with Cuba. Many of the “ancient African organizing principles of song and dance” (Thompson 1984: 2) that I had come to study—though expressed in unique ways on the island—were already familiar to me. My connection to Africa, both culturally and by my dark skin color, identified me with the Afrocubans who were primarily responsible for the music that interested me. I also believe that an unknown ancestor of mine was among the rebellious blacks expelled from Point Coupee, Louisiana to Cuba in 1795 (Gomez 1998: 53), or one of those that came to New Orleans from Cuba after abolition on the island in 1886 (Acosta 1989: 28), and that their spirit binds me to Cuba and is responsible for my Cuban accent! Thus my fieldwork in Cuba was about history in a personal as well as a diasporic sense.

In all this experience I became swept away, out of contact with family and professors, AWOL, gone native, living what I knew to be an ordained dream, destined for

¹⁶ I ran errands.

me, that only I could fulfill. I learned as a participant observer about life in Cuba, my own country the U.S., and about myself. I think my perspective will be a fresh one for anthropology that begins to link recent scholarship about music and popular culture from both places and provides a fascinating example of fieldwork from a very peculiarly inside perspective.

My mother's postcard read "Umi, Cuba is a must for you. I am sure there are many aspects of this country that you would enjoy. The people are great. Many pay tribute to Changó for protection." Along with all the orishas, Changó was helping me along a path with heart. If I travel it to the end, or as far as I can, the result will be good, many will learn from my experience. I hope the Cubans, from government officials to dear friends, who opened the way for me will be interested, challenged by, and proud of what I have done, and that my work will be another bridge to Cuba (Behar 1998). I hope my mentors in anthropology will be impressed by my contribution to the discipline. I will be grateful too if my loved ones finally understand why I was gone so long.

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Glossary

- aché—the power to make things happen
- agogó—African bell, musical instrument
- agogo—braided hairstyle worn in honor of orisha Changó
- agromercado—state sponsored farmers market
- aguardiente—fire water, strong alcohol
- ahí na ma—common colloquial expression, means it’s just right, keep it right there
- Alabao—part of a common saying, “alabao sea el santísimo”, let God be praised, an expression of surprise
- amala—ritual dish of cornmeal porridge prepared for Changó
- aplatanao—cubanized, a foreigner made ‘Cuban’
- apagón—planned or unplanned blackout caused by energy shortages
- asere—colloquial for buddy, friend, derived from “I salute you” in the language of the Abakuá secret society
- babalawo—high priest in the Yoruba tradition, diviner par excellence
- baile de maní—Kongo derived fight-dance contest in which male contestants form a circle and take turns trying to fell each other with punches amidst dance and improvised song
- bajichupa—garment, light strapless top worn by women (baja y chupa, pull down and suck)
- baracón—Barracoons were holding cells from which slaves were sold, and also refer to housing for blacks on plantations both during and after slavery (barracoon in English)
- barbudo—name given to bearded Cuban revolutionary fighters
- batá—trio of hourglass shaped, double headed talking drums of the Yoruba people preserved in Cuba
- batey—the sugar mill grounds, compound
- bonkó—Afrocuban word meaning friend, or brother

candela—literally fire, for anything or person ‘to be (ser) candela’ signals mischievousness

carro—particular taxi that goes up and down main thoroughfares in Havana, usually old model American cars

casabe—a dry, round bread/cracker baked originally by Taino natives from the ground root of the yucca plant

casino—salon dance popularized in Cuba in the 1950s which remains popular today, Cuban salsa dance

chabacano/a—low class, vulgar

champola—horn passages in timba popular dance music

Changó—Yoruba deity of thunder, lightning, dance, drum, and male virility

changüí—musical style, ancestor of the son rhythm, from eastern Cuba

chardo/a—black person

chavito—slang term for Cuban “convertible pesos” equivalent to the U.S. dollar

chequendengue—flavor, style (see also sandunga)

choteo—ironic, distinctly Cuban humor

cimarrón—runaway slave, maroon

clave—rhythmic pattern that guides most Afrocuban music

conjunto—band consisting of piano, upright bass, bongó, conga, guitar, four trumpets, and three singers. It developed in the 1940s and mostly played son, bolero, and guaracha

conga—procession rhythm and happening from eastern Cuba (especially Guantánamo and Santiago)

congrí—dish of rice cooked with black beans

consumir—to consume, to partake in a restaurant or bar

cubanía—cubanness

cubanidad—cubanness

cuenta propia—entrepreneurial business (literally ‘on one’s own’)

dar coco—divination to the orisha with coconuts

derecho—money earned for any service within the context of Afrocuban religion or music

dicharacho—a slang word or phrase

diplo tienda—stores for foreign diplomats in Cuba (before legalization of the dollar), accepting only foreign exchange currency

discofiñe—discotech where popular music is played for the dancing enjoyment of children

discotemba—discotech for middle aged dancers (see temba)

divisa—foreign exchange currency (U.S. and Canadian dollars, Euros, etc.)
 ebbo—sacrifice in Yoruba tradition
 efun—white powder used in lucumí (Yoruba) religious practice
 egun—ancestor
 ekelekuá—a kind of Afrocuban version of “oopsy daisy” or “there we go”
 estribillo—choral refrain, in dialogue with improvised verses from a solo vocalist
 farándula—music/club scene, fans, directors, band members, managers, a subculture with its own norms and laws
 filin—from the English ‘feeling’, this style was characterized by emotive, jazz-style singing
 fiñe—child
 fula (fulankere)—slang for ‘bad’, used also to denote U.S. dollars, in the 19th century it also meant gun powder, something explosive
 guagua—bus
 guaguancó—mid tempo variant of rumba in which a male and female pairs perform a dance of attraction and repulsion, characterized by the males possession gesture called vacunao
 guajiro—country person, farmer
 guaposo—tough guy, gangster
 guaracha—genre of dance music, similar to son, dating back to the 19th century
 güije—black monster
 habanero/a—a person from Havana
 invento—illegal business
 iyésá—refers to a Yoruba subgroup brought in large numbers from West Africa to Cuba, and to specific drums and drum rhythms they use on the island
 jinetero/a—literally ‘a horse jockey’, used to refer to male and female hustlers who make their living off of tourists (also jinetea, the verb)
 maferefun—Yoruba for ‘give praise to...’ used to express thankfulness or reverence to the Orishas
 Malecón—Havana’s oceanfront promenade
 mambo—Afrocuban musical genre, and horn lick within musical lexicon of timba
 mambí—Cuban soldier in the Cuban Independence War of 1895
 mano de orula—‘Hand of Orula’ an initial step of initiation into Yoruba religious practice in Cuba
 mestizaje—race mixing
 modupe—Yoruba for thank you, I appreciate...

moforibale—literally “I scrape my head on the ground” (I prostrate myself), traditional Yoruba greeting used to show respect to elders
 molote—crowd, festive commotion
 montuno—middle section of dance number in which chorus alternates with improvisations by a lead singer
 moreno/a—black person
 niche—black person
 odu—a figure in Yoruba divination (whether Ifa or diloggun)
 Obba—Yoruba river deity, wife of Changó
 Ochun—Yoruba river deity, wife of Changó
 Obatalá—Yoruba deity, eldest of all orisha
 orisha—cultural hero, venerated ancestor, or force of nature
 ossode—a reading by a babalawo through Ifa divination
 pachanga—style, also a specific rhythm and dance from the 1960s
 pachanguita—simple Gilligan style hat popular at the start of the 21st century in Cuba
 paladar—restaurant run out of a home, serving typical Cuban cuisine (comida criolla)
 palestino—refers to Cubans from the east (Oriente) who are often illegally resident and socially scorned in the capital.
 pardo—black person
 pato—homosexual man
 patois—creole language, lingua franca in Jamaica W.I.
 pesao—a jerk, unpleasant person
 pepe—slang for ‘a john’ or a soft touch
 pincha—slang for work or job
 reparto—refers to outlying, marginal neighborhoods of Havana like Mariano, Pogolotti, and Mantilla
 repartero—poorly educated, low class, also refers to hardcore timba dancers and fans
 resolver—to hustle or handle emergent situations by any means necessary
 rumba de solar—popular gathering, party around rumba music (See Fig. 6.8)
 sandunga—flavor, style, feeling
 sello—literally stamp, original characteristics of particular musical groups
 shopping (el)—dollar only stores
 solar—lower class housing, tenement building with shared patio (See Fig. 6.9)
 soneo—improvisation by a solo vocalist in call and response dialogue with a chorus
 soukous—popular music of Zaire and Congo West Africa
 swing—style, elegance, charm

tajona—dance from eastern Cuba in which participants dance around center post, intertwining colorful streams of clothe as they go.
temba—slang for a middle aged person, male or female
to' e' mundo—colloquial Cuban pronunciation of “todo el mundo”, everybody
toque de santo—religious party usually incorporating batá drums
trapihear—to work in the black market (from trapiche, sugar crushing machinery)
vacunao—pelvic thrust, male gesture symbolizing sexual possession from rumba
guaguancó
warriors—Eleguá, Ogun, Ochosi three important orishas of the Yoruba pantheon worshipped in Cuba
wanikiki—slang for money
wemilere—Yoruba religious party with drumming
yambu—slow, old form of rumba (along with guaguancó and columbia)

Abstract

It makes sense to study Cuban culture through music because in Cuba music is everywhere, as elemental as water and air. The Cuban musical form called timba is interesting to examine because of the moment of its birth, development and boom, a time of transformation and social crisis in which the Cuban phrase “seguimos en combate” (we are still at war) is particularly poignant, as well as because of the complex system of social relations that exists around the music. Along with the typical characteristics of Cuban son, timba has combined new sounds, instruments, new sections in the classic son format of introduction-body-montuno and, perhaps most significantly, has assumed a different attitude in conceiving and performing popular dance music. I contend that timba was born as a maroon music in the face of challenges posed by a radically changing Cuban society in crisis throughout the decade of the 1990s, in which it has been necessary for certain Cubans— blacks and mulatos especially—to reaffirm their identity, presence, and importance in their own terms inside the culture and social structure of Cuba. The aggressive sounds, marginal themes, vulgar, coded lyrics and the at times eccentric or “ghetto” self representations are but affirmations of identity that intend not to destroy Cuban society but rather to find a just position within it, as has been the case for blacks and mulatos in Cuba since colonial times. Dancing and being—creating, dancing timba music as well as performing the self according to specific strategies in various spaces—Afrocubans extend an historical identity into the future which is in dialogue and tension with wider Cuban society.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Methods

It makes sense to study Cuban culture through music because in Cuba music is everywhere, as elemental as water and air. Particularly popular dance music, with contributions from all of Cuba's cultural components (African, Hispanic, Chinese, indigenous, Haitian, Jamaican, etc.), has penetrated every fiber of the society. By looking at the musical form timba and various dance spaces in Havana where it is performed, this dissertation tells about social crisis and transformation and the role of music as a mirror, medium for, and an active element in the creation of national culture. During the moment of timba's birth, development, and boom—the 1990s—the Cuban phrase “*seguimos en combate*” (we are still at war) was particularly poignant; and a new music developed to express the times. Like other genres and rhythms have been in the past, timba is now the music/dance style that is most cultivated in Cuba (Sarduy 2001: 171; Pérez 2003: 130; Perna 2005). Its borrowings from Cuban son¹⁷, and from other

¹⁷ A musical and vocal style of dance music considered one of the basic, most important genres of Cuban music. Its structure has Bantu African as well as Spanish elements mixed in a Cuban way with rhythmic turns, choruses, percussion, and guitar tones. It is danced in closed partner position. The musical ensemble to play it classically includes tres (guitar-like instrument with three pairs of chords) or guitar, sometimes accompanied by marimbula (large wooden box with metal keys to pluck; a big thumb piano), güiro, clave and bongó. It was born in Eastern Cuba at the end of the 19th century in towns like Guantánamo, Baracoa, Manzanillo, and Santiago de Cuba. It became the most authentic expression of the humble sectors of the Cuban social, economic, political structure [blacks and mulatos]. Throughout the 20th century composers like Ignacio Piñero, Arsenio Rodríguez, and performers like trumpeter Felix Chapottín and singer Benny Moré helped to establish son as music of national and international popularity and influence (Orovio 1992:

national and international genres, make it so that almost everyone can enjoy. (It's often said that, 'if you don't dance to this, you won't dance to anything!')¹⁸ Its popularity in Cuba and abroad has sparked debate among academics and intense media promotion, created new dance spaces, inspired musical creativity and output, and influenced government policy. At the same time, timba faces criticism and rejection from some sectors of the public (1) because of its identification with marginal black identity and (2) for perceived hedonistic, capitalist tendencies in the music. In spite of its detractors timba is impossible to ignore. Its presence as an important cultural phenomenon is indisputable. My own wish to visit Cuba was inspired by timba, which I discovered through discs of El Médico de la Salsa.

Because it taps into the spirit of struggle and creativity, I refer to it as “timba brava”, and, furthermore, call it “maroon music” following Puerto Rican historian Angel Quintero Rivera¹⁹ (see chapter three). The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines “maroon” as “a fugitive black slave in the West Indies in the 17th and 18th centuries; the descendant of such a slave; plantation slaves who had run away to live free in uncultivated parts” (1992). “Brava”—brave, ferocious, wild, splendid—refers to the anger, unpredictability, and excellence associated with maroons and timba. What might at first seem odd connections allude to continuing systems of racial inequality and the relationship between marginalized communities and the powers that be.

Both timba and maroon life from the colonial period in the Caribbean are based on “outsider identity”, unique language, “raiding”, and the use of old principles to improvise new styles in emergent social circumstances, which Amiri Baraka calls “the changing same” (Jones 1967). Maroons “stress individual style and dramatic self-

455-60). Son was the main ingredient in New York salsa of the 1970s and continues to be a major touchstone for contemporary musicians in Cuba and elsewhere.

¹⁸Si tú no bailas con esto, tú no bailas con nada!

¹⁹For Quintero, salsa is maroon music because its base—in the form of earlier styles—was set by mixed ethnic communities in opposition to colonial authority.

presentation, openness to new ideas, and value innovation and creativity” (Price 1999: 285). Quintero offers a definition of the Taíno-Caribbean root word *símaran*:

Stray or ‘runaway’ arrow...from there it took on the meaning of ‘gone’, ‘up in arms’, or ‘mad’ used to describe domestic animals that took to the hills, and to men—first Indians then later blacks—who rose up and sought their freedom far from the dominion of their masters (1998: 265).

Generally, the maroons were enslaved indigenous and African peoples who escaped from bondage and established viable communities throughout the Americas, and fought to maintain their hard-won freedom (Agorsah 1994: 2). As a response to socioeconomic oppression, cultural colonialism, and racism, *marooning* is a common strategy throughout the Black Atlantic—linking Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America (Depestre 1984: 261). Often we think of Cuba in terms of its uniqueness—called Cuban exceptionalism—as the largest Caribbean island, with huge international musical influence, its communist revolution under Fidel Castro, etc. The maroon aesthetic, however, helps rightly situate Cuba as part of a region, “a historic family” (Ibid.: 260; Mintz and Price 1985; Mintz 1989; Benítez-Rojo 1996) shaped by similar events and circumstances²⁰.

On Cuba’s sister island, Puerto Rico, maroons “sought to live on the margins of the state” (Quintero 1998: 276). This distance was not due to any opposition to the state per se, but rather to their aversion to subordination under its regime. To safeguard their position maroons sometimes fought on behalf of the colonial masters or signed treaties that pit them against fugitive slaves. Scholars acknowledge maroons as “frontline fighters in the struggle against slavery in all its forms”; but also emphasize maroons’

²⁰ Some of the known maroon communities include those of eastern and western Jamaica; the Paramaka, Saramaka, Matawai and Kwinti of Suriname; the Aluku of French Guiana; the Palenqueros of Colombia; the Garifuna of the Atlantic coast of Central America; the maroons of the Costa Chica region of Mexico; the quilombos of Brazil; the cimarrones of Cuba and the Seminole maroons of Oklahoma, Texas, Mexico, and the Bahamas (Agorsah 1994: 2). Contemporary music/dance styles from these areas also merit investigation as extensions of the maroon aesthetic.

“strong ideas of *self*-sufficiency, *self*-help and *self*-reliance” (Agorsah 1994: xiv, emphasis mine). It is this concern with self-preservation that saw maroon communities act in ways that compromised the struggles of other oppressed groups under slavery, or indeed aided that system. While sociocultural “marronage” certainly entails transforming the anguish of the Black condition and the status of servitude through “creative explosion” (Depestre 1984: 271, 258), the relationship between maroon communities and dominant society remains complex and at times contradictory. In fact, the maroons who had been the “chief opponents” of the slave society at turns became “its main props” (Bilby 1994: 83). The maroon aesthetic—and timba—exist in conflict and complicity with the state and mainstream culture.

In his book *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean*, Richard Burton develops an argument that helps explain this contradiction within the maroon aesthetic. Following Michel de Certeau (1980) by eschewing the common use of the word “resistance” to mean *all counteraction* against a hegemonic power, Burton explains the relationship between a newly defined “resistance” and what is called “opposition” to describe the liberating cultural explosions of New World blacks. In this conception, resistance refers to “those forms of contestation of a given system that are conducted from *outside* that system, using weapons and concepts derived from a source other than the system in question”; while opposition refers to “those forms of contestation of a given system that are conducted *within* that system, using weapons and concepts derived from the system itself” (Burton 1997: 6).

Burton echoes Foucault (1978: 95-96) stating that instances of true “resistance” are rare in human history, in the case of the Caribbean happening perhaps only in Saint Domingue between 1791 and 1804, and in Cuba in the late 1950s. He contends, for example, that in most Caribbean contexts, once island-born slaves began to outnumber those of African origin, contestation took the form of “opposition”, because they drew

heavily on materials (like language and religion) furnished by the dominant culture (Burton 1997: 6). In the process, oppressed peoples not only oppose the dominant group on the latter's own ground, but are themselves drawn further into the dominant group's world view. I state earlier that timba is maroon music due to its creativity and spirit of struggle. Resistance is another word that could express timba as a kind of marronage, or cultural counterattack. However, opposition (in the sense that de Certeau and Burton use it) is more accurate because it acknowledges the contradictory aims of those acting through timba, as well as the origins of some of their greatest "weapons" (like conservatory musical training or U.S. designer fashion) within dominant Cuban or Western society.

Timba was born in the face of challenges posed by a radically changing Cuban society in crisis throughout the decade of the 1990s. We will see how timba is an important voice for Afrocuban people. In as much as it creates/constitutes a space for particularly Afrocuban social/cultural/economic development timba is "maroon music", in both dialogue and tension with Cuban society. Along with the typical characteristics of Cuban son, timba has combined new sounds, instruments, ways of playing, new sections in the classic son format of introduction-body-montuno and, perhaps most significantly, has assumed a different attitude in conceiving and performing popular dance music. Eugene Banks explains that the difference between salsa and timba is "a matter of stance, power, and lethal intent—the difference between a debate and a riot" (Banks 2004: 70).

It is important to understand just what is meant by the aggressiveness, the fragmentation, and "mal gusto" (bad taste) among other characteristic elements that many students of timba have noted. What or who has brought these elements into being? At what or whom are they directed? What do these musical developments have to do with the social environment in Cuba from 1990 to the present?

Methods and Approach

In *Robert H. Lowie, Ethnologist: A Personal Record*, a book written to stress the methods of fieldwork and convey what lessons it taught him, for the benefit of ethnographers that would come after him (Lowie 1959: viii), the author lays out several basic techniques for the study of complex societies. Despite their age, his suggestions remain useful in coming to terms with a complex (post)modern, Caribbean society like Cuba. Several of them I chose to employ in my own work: reference to a limited number of social questions; consulting research by Cubans about Cuba; reading newspapers for public opinion; a diverse but necessarily limited group of sources or informants; stories told by the people (interviews); noting incidental happenings (observation); using case studies to achieve a depth of observation impossible in a mass study (Ibid.: 152-3).

Paul Gilroy asserts that “the power of music in developing black struggles by communicating information, organizing consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational, demands attention to the formal attributes and the moral basis of this expressive culture” (Gilroy 1993: 36). He continues: “comprehending them necessitates an analysis of the lyrical content and the forms of musical expression, as well as the hidden social relations in which these deeply encoded oppositional practices are created and consumed” (Ibid.: 37). My fieldwork endeavors to follow up on his suggestions using Lowie’s tools and my own *aché*.

What is meant by the term Afrocuban? What is the historical development and significance of (Afro) Cuban music from the end of the 19th century to the dawn of the 21st? How are concepts of race, class, and gender performed around music in distinct spaces within the context of Cuban society? How does Cuba fit into the notion of diaspora? What of my identities as African (American), man, anthropologist, dancer,

photographer, santero, *negro prieto* (dark skinned), etc.? How did my very being affect and effect my experience in Cuba? Focusing on Havana, the capital, as emblematic of the nation as a whole, these are the main questions my fieldwork attempted to answer.

As far as written sources, I have been more than anything interested in what Cubans have had to say about themselves. I spent a lot of time in the archives at the Center for the Investigation and Development of Cuban Music (CIDMUC) reviewing scholarly and popular articles about the musical and cultural phenomenon called timba, which is the subject of my study. During the time of my research the first book length treatment of the subject by Cubans was in the final stages of preparation by CIDMUC researchers, Liliana Casanella and Neris González Bello. (In fact, information from an interview I conducted with bandleader David Calzado at their request and to my delight was to be used for that publication.) To better understand Afro Cuba in terms of the literature I have examined both old and recent publications in English and Spanish language. At the Fernando Ortiz Foundation I examined the works of don Fernando, as well as the fruits of its journal *Catauro, revista cubana de antropología*. I bought as many books as I could carry from the booksellers in Havana and Santiago de Cuba, rich as they were with treasures hard to find in the States.

My informants came through recommendations, gumption and persistence, as well as pure luck. To get the information I wanted I targeted three main groups: musicians, academics, and everyday people. Within each group I tried to achieve a diversity of age, gender, class background, and personal aesthetic or style. I interviewed a young woman who studied clarinet and sound engineering at the university and, though of color (we debated often whether she was mulata or jabá), was unfamiliar with the performance of popular—let alone “African”—music and musical spaces. I also interviewed Orderquis Revé, younger brother of the late, great Elio Revé, one of the pioneers of contemporary Cuban music, who is totally steeped in popular music as a

bandleader, as well as African religious and political culture, as a babalawo and something of an “afrocentrist”.

Danilo Orozco (a well-known ethnomusicologist who claims to be the original founder of what would become the Buena Vista phenomenon), musicologist Olavo Alén, philologist Liliana Casanella (mentioned above), poet and ethnologist Miguel Barnet, musicologist Maria Teresa Linares, writer Nancy Morejón, and journalist/novelist Leonardo Padura are among those I call here “academics”, but who also feel their music and their people. Conversations and interviews with my madrina Miriam Viant, my hosts Alexis Baró and his wife Amor, folks from the neighborhood, my friends and their friends and family represent every day people in the context of this study. In order to stimulate more and better questions about music and musical spaces I devised a short questionnaire that I distributed among different people at random. I did not intend a “representative sample” but rather used the surveys to gain insights that would help deepen my interactions with a limited number of key individuals.

In my interviews I avoided relying on a written, set list of questions. Especially among musicians and lay people I did not want to seem like “a man with a paper in his hand”, as Gwaltney’s informant calls researchers with no clue or an evil intention (1980: xxiv). Instead I would study particular aspects of the interviewee’s background to shift and choose my questions, to determine just how I would attempt to focus our conversation. These encounters took place in a wide range of locales: at my apartment, in front of the Karl Marx theater, inside Salón Rosado Benny Moré at La Tropical, at the Instituto Superior de Arte, walking down the street in Old Havana, at Abdala Recording Studios, after rehearsal in the Arenal Theater in Buena Vista, after shows in the tiny backstage area at the new Casa de la Música in Centro Habana, or in the garden bar of the original Casa in Miramar. I recorded all the interviews with a SONY audiocassette recorder, and transcribed the interviews myself with some help from my madrina, Miriam

Viant. In most cases there was one official interview conducted, though more interaction and conversation on the subject took place as well.

Among musicians I sought interviews with those that had some of the following characteristics: they were considered pioneers in the development of Cuban music (César Pedroso, Changuito, Gonzalo Rubalcaba); they were considered very popular in Havana and sometimes abroad (David Calzado and La Charanga Habanera, Manolito Simonet, Lazarito Valdés, Paulito F.G., Candy Man); they had participated in important musical projects that impacted the form under study (Pedro Fajardo, Orderquis Revé, Pedro Pablo, Rolando Zaldívar, Angel Bonne); they were up and coming and represented a unique vantage from which to comment on Cuban music (Yvette Porras, Tirso Duarte). Access and availability were key factors as well. Juan Formell, founder of Los Van Van, for example, is conspicuously absent because he was ill and I could not access him during my field research, though I did interview members of the group.

In terms of observing music and the spaces where it happens in Havana, my approach was thus. Following to an extent, but not exactly, the work of Katrina Hazzard-Gordon in *Jookin'*, I observed dance spaces in Havana from two basic groups or types, each with its own continuum of variations. In what Hazzard-Gordon would call the “joke continuum” (1990: x) I frequented public outdoor dances (bailes públicos), rumbas de solar, toques de santo, and pun pun. The joke continuum refers to institutions that appear exclusively in the black community and essentially underground, and thus require practically no assistance from public officials in order to function (Ibid.). They can be linked in form and function directly to Africa, employing group participation, call and response, and the hot circle as performative tools.

Rumba de solar—or *rumba tradicional*—is considered the most spontaneous, organic and “authentic” manifestation of the rumba music-dance complex (Daniel 1995: 101), taking place in alleyways or on street corners in the marginal neighborhoods of

urban areas (like two of my adopted neighborhoods, Los Sitios and Marianao—see chapter two). This rumba, as opposed to state organized sessions, defies rules, and there is no differentiation between, professional, amateur, or general public dancers (Ibid.). *Toques de santo* are ceremonial drum celebrations in the lucumí community, practitioners of religion and life ways brought to Cuba by enslaved Yoruba and developed by their descendants, in which ancient, complex rhythms, dance, chants, and pantomime are deployed in praise of the orisha. A *pun pun*²¹ is a spontaneous block party (mostly in Eastern Cuba or practiced by orientales in Havana) where the music of choice is Spanish language reggae, like the 1990s hit by the Panamanian, El General, from which the gatherings take their name (*¡Tu pun pun mami, mami no me va matar!*). Reggaetón—produced in Cuba, Puerto Rico, New York and elsewhere—is now the favorite music for these gatherings. I observed these events in the Santa Bárbara barrio in Santiago when Cuban reggae rapper, Candy Man, became popular, and also in Havana when he moved there.

Of these manifestations I focused much more attention on public dances, because it is here where timba, rather than rumba, liturgical Yoruba music, or reggae is performed, though there are instances in which sounds and spaces blend. Also I observed spaces that belong to what Hazzard-Gordon would call “the commercial urban complex”, which require official sanction and have no direct precursors in the African past (Hazzard-Gordon 1990: x). Nightclubs, cabarets, discotechs, and official rumbas are part of this group. I focused on clubs and discotechs like La Casa de la Música, La Cecilia, El Diablo Tun Tun, Café Mi Habana, etc. where timba music was the main attraction in the form of live bands and recorded music played by deejays.

Hazzard-Gordon’s model, with its strict separation between grassroots and state sponsored social events—though valuable for use throughout the African Diaspora—was

²¹From Jamaican patois, *pun pun* originally refers to a woman’s vagina.

developed specifically to describe the experience of blacks in the U.S. and does not fit Cuba perfectly. In socialist Cuba the state is involved in perhaps most cultural activities, especially beyond the level of family celebrations, religious or otherwise. I still, however, locate public dances among the jook joints because their nature remains very popular, and the state, though present, does not overly regulate or obstruct the proceedings. Usually dances are staged to mark state sponsored holidays or events such as the end of the summer, carnival, the anniversary of the founding of a major band, international youth summits, etc. In socialist Cuba the State is always near, yet in some cases it works with rather than against juke spaces.

Inside the various kinds of spaces I tried to determine who was present, taking into account nationality, age, gender, and skin color. I also took stock of what people do, how they behave and how they interact with each other. I considered the dance spaces important arenas of social intercourse, exemplifying Paul Gilroy's concept of the *politics of transfiguration* in which "the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association with racial communities of interpretation and resistance (1993: 37)" are actualized, acted out, through specific cultural productions associated with defined spaces. Before continuing my discussion of timba and dance spaces in Cuba I need to explain just what I mean by performance.

Performance

Events like rituals, ceremonies, carnivals, concerts, meetings, meals, and dance parties all attempt to invoke and wield infinite possibility. They make use of many different modes of verbal and nonverbal communication, from coded speech, to facial expressions, and choreographed movement, in order to make something happen. Just what that is varies based on place and circumstance. According to Victor Turner the word "performance" comes from the French *parfournir*, "to complete" or "to carry out

thoroughly” (1982: 13). Performance then refers to acts that enact and bring to fruition our very humanity in particular situations and spaces; they are embodied proof of and lived reference to the laws, beliefs, and philosophies created in the human mind.

Most times performances serve to (re)define and (re)inforce identity, or challenge the status quo and address grievances within the community. They do so in an improvisatory way, always subject to creative interpretation and/or breakdown, which is part of their social force. Many ethnographers have focused on the structure, choreography, intentions, and outcomes of rites and ceremonies (which are performances), paying little attention to the processual and political nature of the events in question (Malinowski 1922; Hurston 1938; Dunham 1946). Only more recently have researchers begun to privilege the tenuous *act* of making things happen—the process and relevant factors that affect it—as an important locus of meaning (Bauman 1977; Turner 1982, 1986; Geertz 1983; Daniel 1995, 2005; Limón 1995; Jackson 2001; Askew 2002).

Performance takes place on the individual level of self-presentation and role-playing, and on the level of collective action by imagined communities. Performances have been analyzed as text or as theater. Using both approaches and giving detailed attention to the politics surrounding performance represents an ongoing shift in the anthropological study of behavior.

Clifford Geertz discusses the shortcomings of functionalist theory in the study of religion and ritual in culture. (In his discussion, the term ritual could easily be substituted for performance.) He characterizes the functionalist approach by invoking Durkheim for whom ritual reinforces the traditional social ties between individuals, strengthens, and perpetuates the social structure of a group through the ritualistic or mythic symbolization of the underlying social values upon which it rests (1973: 142). This approach provides some understanding of the social and psychological “functions” of religion (and ritual/performance) in a wide range of societies. However, as this model

assumes the function of religion to be one of maintaining the status quo, it does not leave room for change. Geertz' argument that religion is also an important space in which culture change is worked out, follows also for performance.

Culture is always in flux. The incongruence of "culture and social structure" is a primary driving force for change in society (1973: 144). Culture considers social action in respect to its meaning for those who carry it out, social structure considers it in terms of its contribution to the functioning of some social system. The interplay between culture, social structure, and *individual personality* (agency) is key to the analysis of performance. Through performance members of particular societies act to find a better fit between themselves and the structures within which they live. As Paul Gilroy has signaled, the study of black Atlantic or African Diaspora culture requires attention to performance, because it is through performance that much cultural development and political action is taken.

Geertz continues his argument by describing and analyzing a performance that went awry, which failed, proving that performance can actually deviate from exact patterns, and subvert rather than always affirm tradition. Though trained in the tradition of structural-functionalism (1986: 9), Victor Turner's work shifts attention to the very processes of change that his forebears neglected. His concept of social drama as a model for cultural change opens a new way to conceive of performances (rituals, ceremonies, carnivals), as responses in the working out of some larger scale social conflict. These performances take place in sacred spaces, sectioned off from ordinary life. He outlines the phases of breach, crisis, redress, and reconciliation, situating performances as tools used in the redress phase. Through performance, he argues, people do the self-reflexive work of negotiating culture and social structure. His use of the concepts of liminal and liminoid stresses precisely the transformative, unpredictable nature of performance, its subjunctive mood—the reality that in performance anything can happen.

Liminal he designates for simple societies, where compulsory ritual and ceremony express this subjunctivity, while liminoid he assigns to modern societies in which compulsory activities are largely replaced by voluntary or leisure activities (like dance clubs or public dances). When communities enter into this subjunctive mode they “play with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from the unprecedented combinations of familiar elements” (27). These settings in which new models, symbols, and paradigms arise are the seedbeds of cultural creativity. Furthermore, these developments don’t just arise and disappear, but rather feed back into the ‘central’ economic and politico legal domains. In Johan Huizinga’s words, “with the end of [performance] its effect is not lost; rather it continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside” (1971: 14).

Rather than considering formalized rituals, theatrical productions, or carnivals, Erving Goffman considers performances among and between people on a smaller scale: social situations or encounters that occur and can be analyzed in a wide variety of contexts (from the very carnivals that concern Turner to Mental Health facilities where Goffman conducts his observations). For Goffman there are “social situations” bounded in space and facilitated by fixed equipment—like carnival or the public dance in Cuba—and within them there are “gatherings” and “situations” like the bar area in a club, or el molote²² in the public dances of Cuba, where those present are more in contact with and aware of each other. In this way he shows how multiple social realities can occur in one place (18). In a given encounter, or gathering, within a social situation “each giver is himself a receiver, and each receiver is a giver” of “embodied messages” (15). While these signs seem ill fitted for extended discursive messages, in contrast to speech, they do convey information about the actor’s social attributes and about his conception of himself, of the others present, and of the setting (34).

²² A crowd or festive commotion.

Goffman perceives two basic kinds of messages: linguistic (verbal or text) and expressive. In linguistic messages information is written or stated flatly (although linguistic communications may also be twisted), while in expressive messages the subject “emits, exudes, or gives off information to someone who gleans it” (Goffman 1963: 13). Expressive messages, he suggests, lend themselves more to double entendre, ambiguity, subversion, and resistance. Also, “these [expressive] messages are necessarily ‘about’ the same causal physical complex of which the transmitting agency is an intrinsic part” (Ibid.). That is to say that the messages are tied to the specifics of the physical environment and interpersonal communications therein, which in turn refer to larger social phenomena on the order of Turner’s social drama.

A case in point from Cuba would be a white Cuban prostitute’s at first negative/rejecting, and subsequent positive/accepting behavior toward a black Bahamian tourist in a bar. Drinks and food refused or accepted, eye contact, dancing (or not), types of movement, etc. are tied to the club as a space and refer to larger social phenomena. In this case the young woman at first rejects the black man because she figures he is from Cuba, signaling probable weak economic status in relation to other men at the club who are foreign and white. She also might not expect him to be a tourist because black people are relatively few in tourist markets all over, again because of economics and social politics.

This preference for foreigners reflects a world economic system that attempts to orient the economies of Third World (economically powerless, peripheral nations) in dependent relationships toward the center, and discourages links and cooperation among subordinate peoples (Rodney 1982; Formento 2002). The situation exemplifies the dependent economic position of Third World nations and the extremes of sacrifice their citizens make in order to survive. In Goffman’s expressive messages meaning is not “firmly established” (13). It is possible for the subject to deny what others claim they

meant. Expressive messages must often preserve the fiction that their meanings are uncalculated, spontaneous, and involuntary.

José Limón examines “speech and body play” which expresses a “carnavalesque and critical difference” (Limón 1994: 125). By analyzing how a group of Mexican-American *batos*²³ in South Texas performs identity and resistance he argues that their performances are “multivolic symbols possessing several meanings” (Ibid.: 130). These men’s phallic jokes and comic references to anal penetration, he suggests (following Mary Douglas), are allusions to their vulnerable position vis-à-vis upper levels of the power structures in both Mexico and the U.S.—their “socially penetrable status” (131). These performance events “interactionally produce meaning, mastering anxiety by inverting passive destiny through active play” (133).

Performance, whether as speech behavior, presentation of the self in everyday life, stage drama, or social drama is important in postmodern theory, which sees in the very flaws, hesitations, personal factors, incomplete, elliptical, context-dependent, situational components of performance clues to the very nature of human process itself (Turner 1986: 77). “Established rules, customs, and symbolic frameworks exist, but they operate in the presence of areas of indeterminacy, of ambiguity, of uncertainty and maneuverability. Order never fully takes over, nor could it” (Ibid.: 78). The word plays of the Mexican-American humor in South Texas described by Limón are examples. The consumption and bluffing of the *especulador* are as well.

Black Atlantic performance “[poses] the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be” (Gilroy 1993:36). In order to study “the power of music in developing black struggles by communicating information, organizing consciousness, and testing out or developing the forms of subjectivity required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational” it is

²³ Chicano slang for guy, dude.

necessary to consider both the formal attributes of performances and the moral bases of expressive culture (Ibid.). “Comprehending them necessitates an analysis of the lyrical content and the forms of musical expression (chapter three) as well as the oft hidden social relations (chapters four and five) in which these deeply encoded oppositional practices are created and consumed” (Ibid.: 37). Paul Gilroy is talking about Goffman’s “linguistic and expressive” messages in the service of social transformation: “Politics...[is] played, danced, and acted, as well as sung because words can’t express [an] unsayable claim to truth” (Ibid.: 37). Gilroy refers to the sublime justice of freedom as a cause, and also signals the hotly contested nature of cultural, political discourse through performance.

In Cuba, Brazil, Tanzania, or wherever songs are banned, musicians censured, artists exiled we see that statements with the potential to affect social relationships have serious consequences. Performers attempt to subvert authority and still leave themselves an escape hatch by using coded language, gesture, double meaning, and humor. “The bounds of politics are extended precisely because this tradition of expression refuses to accept that the political is a readily separable domain” (Ibid.: 38). (Salsa band La Charanga Habanera was criticized in Cuba for a song it did likening Fidel to a green mango, ready to fall off the tree.) Presaging Coronil’s affirmation of “power in the rumba” (Coronil 1995: xiv), Gilroy writes that “artistic expression, expanded beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by the masters as a token substitute for freedom, becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation” (Op. cit.: 40).

Gilroy calls for the integration of language based and theatrical models in research on performance in the Black Atlantic. Goffman’s “linguistic” and “expressive” messages (Goffman 1963: 13) mix and become one multifaceted performance. In my work about *bailes públicos* and the character of the *especulador* in Cuba I attempt to

“make sense of musical performances in which identity is fleetingly experienced in the most intensive ways and sometimes socially reproduced by means of...mimesis, gesture, kinesis, and costume”. I call this performative call and response. It entails the integration of “distinctive patterns of language” as well as “dramaturgy, enunciation, and gesture” as called for by Gilroy, which yields richer results than studies premised exclusively on textuality and narrative (Ibid.: 75). It is linked also to the intense, often violent, reciprocity Ortiz describes with his concept of transculturation. Even the conqueror is changed, because in Turner’s words “the performance transforms itself” (Turner 1982: 28), and everyone is performing. “The rules ‘frame’ the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its frame (Turner 1982: 78)”. Power does not simply and only perform itself on the weak; rather both engage and mutually affect each other through various modes of performance.

Following Gilroy’s suggestion that “politics...[is] played, danced, and acted, as well as sung (Ibid.)” in the context of Black Atlantic cultural expressions, I attempted to interpret the various performances taking place simultaneously. I took special note of distinctive patterns of language, dramaturgy, enunciation and gesture. My fieldwork in the dance spaces was oriented towards “mak[ing] sense of the musical performances in which identity is fleetingly experienced in the most intensive ways and sometimes socially reproduced by means of...mimesis, gesture, kinesis and costume (Ibid.: 78)”. You could call this performative call and response and it encompasses the intimate relationship of performer and crowd and all other possible trajectories of communication within the dance space. That is to say interaction in the dance space, but not necessarily in the form of dance or concerned primarily with the music (instead for example, signification by drinking at a table with friends), is readable too.

Like Cuban scholar Pablo Riaño San Marful, I consider the dance spaces important *espacios de sociabilidad* that contribute to the elevation of one or more

national cultures, and where diverse particular identities are constructed, imagined, and interact (Marful 2002: 12). I kept copious field notes mostly every day, moving between Spanish and English, using various text strategies: narrative, poetry, quotations from news and conversation, personal reflections, anthropological theory. Lyrics to songs from studio-recorded and live performances were transcribed by myself and analyzed. Dance is looked at as symbolic and representative body expression that highlights and encourages individual achievement, reaffirms “conventional behavior” or “established patterns” (Dunham 1983: xvi), and allows humanity to momentarily transcend the mundane and access infinite possibility.

My efforts to insert myself in these spaces—dance, academic, and others—where I conducted my investigations entailed “ethnographic high jinx” (see chapter seven) that reveal a lot about my various identities and perceptions of me in Cuba. Cubans are accustomed to being studied by anthropologists due to their rich culture that is so characteristic of the process of transculturation that marks the meeting of cultures everywhere. Even still, swallowing an investigator like me seemed to be a challenge. When I arrived at the José Martí International Airport in Havana on my first trip in 1998, I already spoke Spanish, but not Cuban Spanish, and so I fumbled to understand when they communicated to me as if to another Cuban, “Hey, citizen, you’re in the wrong [customs] line!” This awkward familiarity and distance was to come up time and again as I got to know Cuba better and I moved through different kinds of spaces on the Island.

A note on photographs included in the text

As an artist as well as an anthropologist, making photographs is part of the way I go about understanding the world. If it is true that the eyes are the windows to the soul, then when gazes meet and hold one another the result is sublime and totally human. The images included in this dissertation capture the embrace of the eyes, the expanse of space,

the swinging release of dance—allowing images to speak along with the text. In doing so, they enrich the description of music and Afrocuban experience, which is my focus.

Using a simple, all manual Nikon FM2 camera I developed a relationship with my surroundings. At first the camera seemed too large, too intrusive. I felt that this appendage, this eye, made me a permanent outsider, an unwelcome voyeur. As time went on, however, the camera seemed to shrink and disappear. Eventually not only was I able to capture delicate moments without disturbing them, I was also able to act through photography to dialogue with Cubans about Cuba, especially issues of race and color. The series of photographs included in chapter four “Afro Cuba” is a prime example. In this approach I talked with people about names used to refer to various racial classifications, wrote those words out on the city itself (walls, stair cases, doors, etc.), and then juxtaposed people with the words/ideas they had explained to me. The result was several beautiful images that dramatize race—identity, terminology, and relations—in Cuba. When I returned to Havana years later, many of the graphs and drawing remained on the walls where people continued to comment on and discuss them.

Through this ethnography of music and dance I explore the economic, social, and ideological constraints under which social classes and racial groups interact, focusing especially on Afrocubans. In my work, Afrocuban voices (to use Sarduy and Stubbs’ term) and bodies speak.

Outline

Cubans of color use timba in various ways to identify, impugn, and transgress social boundaries—both literally and figuratively—through music and performance. Through the presence of their music and their physical bodies in various spaces they

reaffirm their identity, belonging and importance inside the culture and social structure of Cuba. The aggressive sounds, marginal themes, vulgar, coded lyrics, and the at times eccentric or “ghetto” self representations are but affirmations of identity that intend not to destroy Cuban society but rather to find a just position within it, as has been the case in the fight of blacks and mulatos in Cuba since colonial times (Fernández 1994; Martínez 2006). Just as Afro Cubans had complex, sometimes contradictory, relationships to oppressive power, whether as maroon communities, combatants in the Ten Years War and the Independence War, or as supporters of the 1959 Revolution (Ferrer 1999; de la Fuente 2001; Helg 1995), their continuing struggle for equality takes unexpected forms and strategies. This is not a simple case of resistance through music, because various sectors of Cuban society—including the state—have claims on timba as well.

Chapter two “Oh La Habana: Translucent City” describes the historical character of Havana, as well as the physical landscape and social dynamics of the city during the Revolutionary era before 1990, as a backdrop to further discussion of music/dance during the so-called special period (1990 and beyond).

Chapter three “Timba Brava: Maroon Music in Cuba” 1) lays out various definitions of timba, 2) traces the development of Cuban music before timba, 3) describes the music and dance style, 4) examines critiques of timba and some of its most important proponents to date. As “maroon” music timba is briefly compared to salsa and other forms of dance music from the Black Atlantic. Vincenzo Perna in his book *Timba: The Sound of the Cuban Crisis* links timba to Afro Cubans—discussing batá drumming, marginalization before and after the Revolution of 1959, mentioning the carnivalesque spirit, black street culture, and a poetics of marginality—but he does not relate timba, or indeed Afro Cubans’ oppositional stance, to any maroon aesthetic. Picking up on what many have written about maroons in the colonial era, and especially noting Quintero Rivera’s use of the idea in relation to New York and Latin American salsa, the maroon

aesthetic highlights timba as the continuance of old ways of surviving, making culture, as well as emphasizes a continued relationship of integration and marginalization as regards black folks in Cuba—extant from colonial times down to Castro.

Chapter four “Afro Cuba” explores social and historical factors that have shaped Afro-Cuban identity²⁴. It 1) discusses Cuban racial categories and relations, 2) describes important black social organizations and publications that contributed to the fight for social justice in Cuba, 3) explores the process/cycle of rejection, acceptance, commodification and recontextualizing of Afro-Cuban culture, 4) and provides evidence from the life experience of Cubans of various social milieus in the form of stories, jokes, etc. In terms of race we learn the social circumstances under which Afro-Cubans created timba, extending the work of scholars who accept that Cuba has made significant progress toward racial equality, yet remains imperfect. I argue that today’s timba music and dance spaces take on the function of organizations and publications that no longer exist, as the voice/open space for black expression.

Chapter five “¿Dónde están los especuladores?” (Where are the speculators?) describes day-to-day living conditions during the special period, economic reforms, and the self-presentation (performance) of Afro-Cuban youth. A social type called the especulador is analyzed as a metaphor for Afro-Cuban youth in dialogue and tension with the Cuban state, mainstream Cuban culture, and “the world outside”. The especulador is analyzed in the context of exclusive dollar-only clubs and discos whose very existence contradicts the socialist ethic and highlights the shortcomings of state policy vis-à-vis

²⁴ I use the term “Afro Cuba” as a noun to refer to the wider community of people of color in Cuba, both black and of mixed race. I intend to foreground the importance of men and women of African descent in Cuban culture, and underscore their historical experience as a collective. (For more on this see chapter four.) In describing individuals and music forms I follow Fernando Ortiz and use the adjective “afrocubano”, capitalized in English as “Afrocuban”. I use this last term in the same way as Sarduy and Stubbs and de la Fuente use “Afro-Cuban”. I eschew their usage in order to more clearly distinguish between the broad category of black Cuban culture and experience on one hand (Afro Cuba), and “Afrocuban” individuals and artistic forms shaped by and contributing to this evolving history, on the other.

Afro Cuba. Perna mentions certain personalities or characters from contemporary urban lore (*personajes*), which inhabit the same environment, but does not explain the various ways of being that define those characters. In depth discussion of the *especulador* and the creation of specific strategies in the performance of identity linked to timba is another important contribution of this work.

Chapter six “The Joy Train: Dance Spaces in Havana” continues to examine spaces where timba is the medium for the performance of identities. I look specifically at public dances at La Piragua and La Plaza de la Revolución in contrast to events at La Tropical and La Casa de la Música. Each represents a space with different characteristics; while all share timba music as the medium for social (inter)action. Building on Chapters one through five we approach these phenomena as important environments for negotiating space, in the ongoing evolution of Afrocuban identity and Cubanness (including sovereignty and economic solvency), through performance.

I show how the public dance—in the absence of *cabildos*, societies, etc.—take on some of their functions. Thus they represent an important social space for the continued development of Cuban society and culture. Perna, Maya Roy, Isabelle Leymarie, and Robin Moore who have addressed timba, mention La Tropical, La Casa de la Música, La Piragua, and other dance spaces, but do not take us there. My work offers a closer look at these spaces, engaging sight, sound, feeling, as well as people’s opinions, perceptions and the contradictions they bring up regarding, for example, negative valuations of blackness. This journey into the dance spaces of Havana is another important contribution of this work.

Chapter seven “Fieldwork” situates the writer in terms of fieldwork methodology and theory. It explains how my own identity in Cuba was shaped by the notion of Afro Cuba, and what happened when that played out in various kinds of spaces—from the public dance, to research institutes, sacred ceremonies, and private homes. It also takes

into account challenges to anthropologists to do ethnography in a way that promotes the liberation of those we study, considering them as collaborators and important audiences for our work.

Chapter eight “Conclusion: Dancing & Being” summarizes my argument, highlights the original contributions of this research to the literature, and points out new directions for future research. Chapter nine “Epilogue: Remembering Manolín” gives a vision of developments in Cuba after my fieldwork was done. It also traces the career of timba singer Manolín, El Médico de la Salsa since his arrival in the U.S., questioning the relevance and viability of timba outside of Cuba.

Chapter 2

Oh La Habana: Translucent City



Fig. 2.0 Havana City

Chapter 2

Oh La Habana: Translucent City

“The sky [in Havana] is a particular shade of blue not found anywhere else, a brilliant, almost translucent cobalt.”

—Alfredo José Estrada (2007: 5)

“Averigua, camina La Habana.”

“Check it out for yourself, explore Havana.”

—Manolín, el Médico de la Salsa

Known as the Pearl of the Caribbean, Paris of the Antilles, and the Key to the New World, Havana is the context for the ethnographic material presented throughout this dissertation about the conflictive, symbiotic relationships between various race/class/gender groups in Cuba, expressed through music and dance. To frame our discussion of what happens in the dance spaces, we should keep in mind Havana’s nature as a point of exchange, a space for forging Cubanness as various cultures overlap, a crossroads. For, though it is true that ruptures (like the various independence and revolutionary struggles) have changed Havana in definitive ways, “in the lives of cities as in other lives, continuities are just as important as ruptures” (Cluster and Hernández 2006: xix). This brief chapter describes the historical character of Havana, as well as the physical landscape and social dynamics of the city during the Revolutionary era before

1990, as a backdrop to further discussion of music/dance during the so-called special period (1990 and beyond). The maps at the end of the chapter can be referenced throughout the dissertation as we traverse the city.

San Cristóbal de La Habana²⁵ was founded on its current site, on the Northwestern coast of Cuba, in 1519. Although many associate the name with the Anglo-Saxon words “haven” or “harbor”, and alternately with the Spanish “sabana” (savanna or prairie), La Habana (Havana in English) is a Spanish transcription of an indigenous denomination for the area, “Avan” (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002: 13; Cluster and Hernández 2006: 1). “Habanaguanex”, a local chief, is another root of the city’s name (Ibid.). This mixing of European and indigenous elements to name the city, and its inauguration at the foot of a grand ceiba tree, with mystical importance in Spain and Africa, portended the genetic and cultural mixing that has come to characterize Havana and Cuba (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 4).

Nature seems to have destined Havana to be an important stop in travel between the Old World and the New. Atlantic waters and wind currents push the ships westward through the channel between Cuba and the Yucatan peninsula until they turn northward in the Gulf of Mexico. Then the current sweeps along the Cuban coast and squeezes through the 90-mile strait between Florida and Cuba, catching the great Gulf Stream along the American Coast before heading back toward Europe (Rogozinski 2000: 8—See Fig. 2.1). Havana was thus a logical stop, from the start an important transfer point for wealth coming from other Spanish colonies as part of the Convey System. In this

²⁵This was the third founding of the town/village. Two prior locations—the first on the southern coast, the second within modern day Havana, but four miles west of the third, permanent settlement—had been found less than ideal (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002: 12). Havana was officially recognized as a city by Spanish decree in 1593.

arrangement, as a means of protecting ships heavy with gold and other treasure, *armadas* (groups of merchant vessels escorted by war ships) returning from Veracruz, Portobelo, or Cartagena to Seville, reassembled in Havana where they refreshed provisions, and then returned home together (see Fig. 2.2).

While sailors, prostitutes, merchants, and slaves shared nourishment and entertainment, the native Taíno were quickly decimated by European disease, forced labor, and wanton violence. Thus early Havana culture was created by mariners of various nationalities (and races), enslaved Africans from various ethnic groups and locations who provided domestic labor, a limited number of European women who worked largely as prostitutes, and a growing mixed-race population, the offspring of the motley crew of characters constantly “passing through”. Early habaneros ate *casabe* (cassava bread) and lived in *bohíos* (thatch-roofed huts of palm leaves), which they learned to make from the native inhabitants before their demise. Hospitality was the mainstay of the local economy. By the end of the 16th century, Havana was Cuba’s capital (the governor general relocating there from Santiago de Cuba in 1553) and known as the “Key to the New World”, supplying drink, cheap lodging, food, gambling, and sex (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 10). Over time, architectural styles, music/dance, religion, politics, and fashion have marked the originality of the city, even as it has mirrored Europe, North and South America, Africa, and other Caribbean islands. From its founding to the 20th century, Havana transformed from a city originally designed and ruled by the Spanish, to one modernized by the United States, and, ultimately governed by a centrally planned Cuban government (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002: 3).

Old Havana consists of the old city contained within a protective wall until the 1860s. It is characterized by narrow streets, carryovers from the days of needing to defend against attackers and to keep the streets cool by stretching awnings above them. As the city grew and spread west, these older quarters retained a bohemian aspect, with bars like La Bodeguita del Medio, coexisting with the financial district, including banks like the American-owned Havana Trust. In Old Havana, street vendors for centuries have taken to the street early in the morning with their chants—passed down over generations—offering tamales, snow cones, peanuts, or sweet mamoncillos, and mangoes in song. Manisero! Manisero, maní, maní! (The peanut vendor, Taíno word for peanuts) Still Old Havana became less desirable than newer areas: it was low lying, susceptible to flooding, close to industrial zones, and overpowered by the stench of the Bay of Havana.

Gradually businesses and wealthy *habaneros* moved out of Old Havana to locales (like New/Centro Habana and Vedado) beyond the original walls. Centro Habana spreads out westward from the old city. It begins along the Prado, where mansions from the turn of the century still stand, then moves along the Malecón up to the Vedado district, its western boundary ending with the University of Havana. Instead of colonial administrative buildings and churches, this area is built up with modest middle-income housing, schools, retailing, and convent hospitals (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002: 49). The corner of Galiano and San Rafael is a main shopping district. Some neighborhoods within Centro Habana, like Cayo Hueso and Los Sitios (where I lived), are known as *barrios rumberos* (rumba neighborhoods), havens for Afrocuban music/dance and

religion²⁶. One of the most important *cabildos* (Changó Tedun) was located on Jesus Peregrino and Belascoaín streets in the Centro Habana neighborhood of Pueblo Nuevo (Ortiz 1994)—and one of Cuba’s most famous slave conspiracies was planned there as well (Brown 2003). The popular dance club La Casa de la Música (Habana) is located on Galiano Street in Centro Habana (Fig. 6.1).

Located still further west, the neighborhood of El Vedado is called “the garden city”, with broad, tree-lined streets and wide sidewalks in front of large and small yards. In contrast to the old city’s picturesque street names that meant avocado, light, sun, or inquisitor, the newer district followed a mapmaker’s grid with odd numbered streets running parallel to the seacoast, and even numbers and letters running uphill from the Malecón (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 137). It was traditionally home to white habanero elites, like the poet Dulce Maria Loynaz and her family who lived on Nineteenth and E Streets until well after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 (Ibid.: 142). As I would walk up K Street to Twenty-fifth, where I lived, I wondered after Langston Hughes, “Maybe the dream’s a Vedado rose...” referring to its beauty and its air of relative exclusiveness. La Rampa (Twenty-third Street from Malecón to L Street) grew in the 1950s and remains a center of action, featuring the Yara Movie Theater, Coppelia ice cream parlor, and the Habana Libre (formerly Hilton) Hotel.

Miramar is a still more exclusive suburb that started to develop with the construction of a drawbridge over the Almendares River in 1921 (today the Fifth Avenue tunnel). It would house the 20th century Havana elite (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002:

²⁶ There is a famous song from the 1940s by Arsenio Rodríguez called “Los Sitios, Asere” that lauds the musicality of the neighborhood, identifying it with Afrocuban culture. Another song, “Los Sitios Enteros,” by NG La Banda from the 1990s affirms the continuity of this Afrocuban identity associated with the area.

49). High-level Cuban government offices, embassies, research centers, and the original Casa de la Música coexist with those residents who moved into empty dwellings in the 1960s and 70s (Ibid.: 137). Some former servants of the upper class remained there, occupying the homes of their former employers.

Across the Almendares but inland from Miramar, the old outlying settlement of Marianao spread eastward to the banks of the Almendares and westward to La Lisa. Marianao is the home of the famous Jardines de la Tropical (see chapter six). I lived in the neighborhood of Finlay (named after the scientist who finally understood how malaria was passed) next to the more famous barrio of Pogolotti, known for Santería, rumba, etc. The neighborhood of Buena Vista, between Miramar and Marianao, is home to the famous dance space Salón Rosado de la Tropical. (See figures 2.3,2.4, 6.3.)

Guanabacoa and Regla are two old villages, across the bay east of Havana, known for strong African culture. Some of the strongest, most influential cabildos and citywide ceremonies were based there. For example, Cabildo de Yemayá de Regla with its annual ritual procession was of key importance in shaping Afrocuban religious practice at the start of the 20th century (Brown 2003). Also the first set of consecrated batá drums in Cuba were made and played in Regla first (Ortiz 1994; Mason 1992). This backwater village also became notorious for cockfighting, smugglers, and illicit gambling (Barclay 1993: 172).

The Malecón is the sea wall promenade and wide boulevard for cars that spans the coral oceanfront of Havana. The construction of it began in 1901 under the first U.S. occupation government, and by 1930 it stretched from east to west along the coast, from the Castillo de la Punta (its starting point) almost to the Almendares River (Cluster and

Hernández 2006: 113, 136). Sometimes wind and waves batter the wall, making the ramparts feel like the prow of a ship. Calm weather brings sun turning the sea into a “prodigy of light and color...the city’s window” as García Lorca called it. Balconied hotels and clubs and apartment houses line its landward side, some built around grand entrances and open staircases in imitation of old aristocratic palaces, others with elevator lobbies or narrower, tile-lined flights of marble stairs. Then it winds around Hotel Nacional (completed in 1930 in Mediterranean style by New York firm McKim, Mead, and Wright). Beyond this point the Malecón embraces Vedado.

Throughout its history, the “precarious coexistence of black and white [people] was intimately mixed with music and dance” in Havana (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 54). Spanish loyalists and creole nationalists, Catholic priests and babalawos, violin and conga, fervent communists and black-market capitalists reflect the “coexistence of creeds” in the city over time (66). Havana, thus, has long been “an urban space in which competing, contemporaneous, parallel or entirely separate communities shaped their cultural approach to life” (Kapcia 2005: 17).

Havana is a funnel and a magnet (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 122). Early on the city attracted migrants from Europe, slaves from Africa and Caribbean, Indians from the Yucatan Peninsula, and Chinese indentured servants (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002: 26). In addition to the Africans, Spanish, and Chinese (and their descendents) already there, during the early 20th century the city accepted thousands of Jews, Greek Orthodox, and Arabs (Ibid.: 44-46; Behar 2002, 2007), uniformly (mis)labeled as *turcos* (Turks). Spaniards who immigrated in large numbers were all called *gallegos*, no matter their actual origins in Asturias, Basque country, Canary Islands, or other parts of the

Iberian Peninsula. Central Europeans and Jews were referred to as *polacos* (Polish), while all Asians were *chinos*. Americans from the U.S. were simply *americanos*. During the first half of 20th century, as a pseudo-colony of the U.S., while Havana outpaced other Latin American cities in terms of development, rural areas and cities of the interior were neglected. Within Havana, poor people—especially Afrocubans—were marginalized.

In 1959, after centuries of colonial and neocolonial rule, with a legacy of inequality based on race and class hierarchy, Havana began to reinvent itself under the direction of Cuba's revolutionary socialist government. In stark response/contrast to the society engendered by Cuba's history before 1959, poor people and blacks, until then almost totally marginalized, gained access to the delights of the city. At the same time, however, national resources were directed away from Havana to the interior, which remained badly underdeveloped relative to the capital. Housing shortages and eroding infrastructure were among the results. Havana became dilapidated. Today's Havana skyline is virtually unchanged from 1959, although worse for wear (Estrada 2007: 241).

Carmelo Mesa-Lago in his study *The Economy of Socialist Cuba* acknowledges that the Revolution significantly reduced race inequalities in income, education, health, social security and, to a lesser extent, housing (Mesa-Lago 1981: 197). He suggests also, however, that after two decades of Revolution, significant racial inequalities persisted. Afrocubans were overrepresented in all diseases, especially those associated with poverty. Blacks were underrepresented in the best-paid, most prestigious, and highly skilled occupations and overrepresented in the worst paid, least prestigious, low-skilled occupations, hence income differences were still noticeable (Ibid.). Also, because Afrocubans had the worst housing in 1958 and moves into new housing or that left by

exiles (as in the case of Miramar) represented only one-fifth of total housing stock, the majority of Afrocubans continued to live in the same housing they occupied at the beginning of the Revolution. Long after the Revolution was underway, Blacks had improved somewhat their housing standards, but still inhabited the worst of the existing stock (Ibid.). Access to space in the city continued to be unequal and contested.

Antonio Kapcia refers to Havana as the city of sweetness and light: “Its role within the evolution of a Cuban cultural identity inevitably links [the city] to the evolution of Cuban sugar [which is] ‘bitter-sweet’...Secondly, light is something that immediately hits any visitor to Havana—the harsh light of the sun contrasted to the shade and to the universal gloom of its badly lit streets” (Kapcia 2005: 24). He finds in the symbols of sweetness and light keys to understanding Cubans’ attempt over time to come to terms with their history, and the meaning of Cuban culture, which (among other components) includes “sugar, slavery, suffering, [and] the island’s characteristic light” (Ibid.: 25).

Today Havana continues to bring together visitors and cultures from all over the world. Havana is the main point of departure and control for island resources bound for North America and Europe, such as sugar, tobacco, and coffee, as well as creole (homegrown) cultural manifestations like the *habanera*, *mambo* and now *timba* (See chapter three). I would extend Kapcia’s idea by suggesting that Havana is an especially *translucent city*, one that admits and diffuses light so that objects beyond cannot be clearly distinguished. This re-imagines transculturation, as light (symbolizing culture) enters, illuminates, and transforms creole and foreign elements into new phenomena. Havana is “infinite possibility”. Havana’s geographic and cultural positioning—between

Europe, Africa, and America, bridging the island and the world “outside”—help make it a translucent city. For these reasons (among others), Havana has had a voice in international questions of style and politics despite its colonial/neocolonial status. This is why in the 1990s timba chose to dance Cuban dreams first and loudest in the streets of Havana.

After the fall of the Soviet Bloc starting in 1989, new economic and social arrangements were at work, the standard of relative equality of living standards and wealth for all Cubans was slipping away, openings in social spaces were constricting, the strides of earlier decades were in peril (see chapter five). I came to Havana to learn about the music/dance that expressed this moment. I became known as a *caminante*—a walker, someone who gets around, goes any and everywhere. In order to find out what I wanted to know, I would traverse the translucent city; in El Médico’s words, *caminar La Habana*.

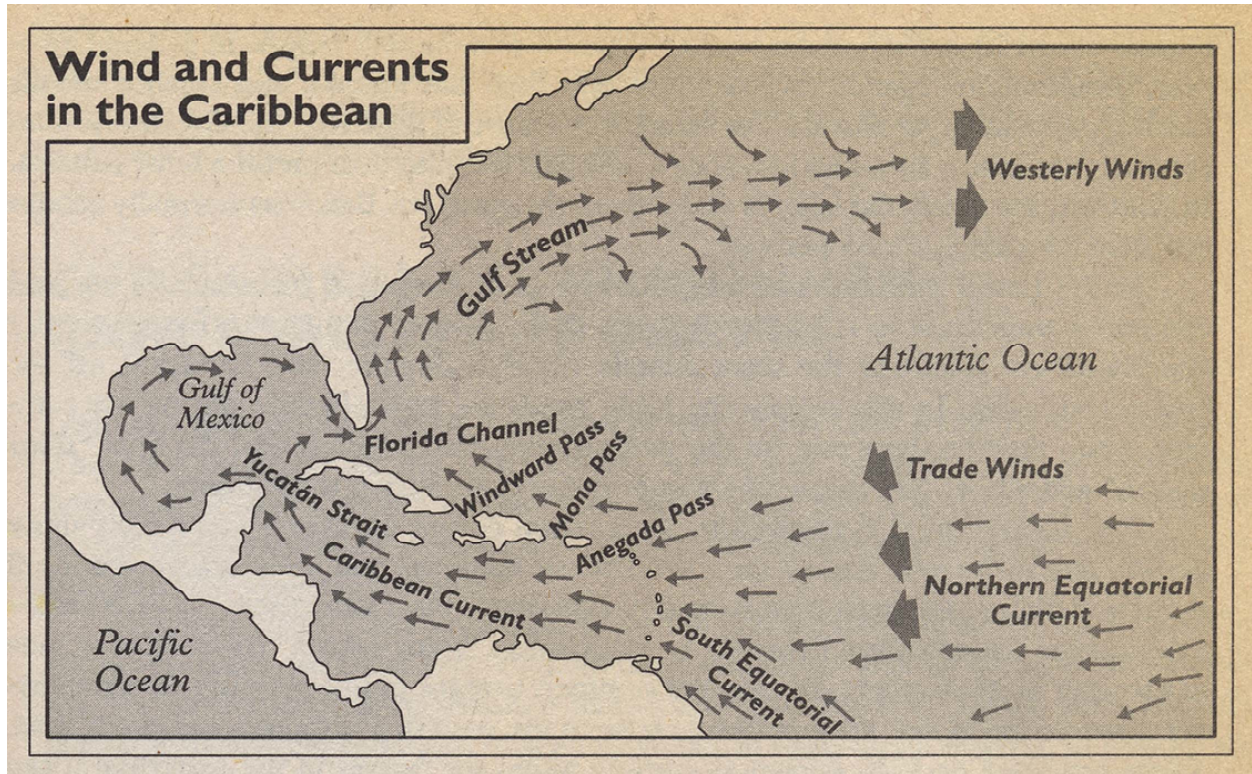


Fig. 2.1 Wind and Currents in the Caribbean (Rogozinski 2000: 9)

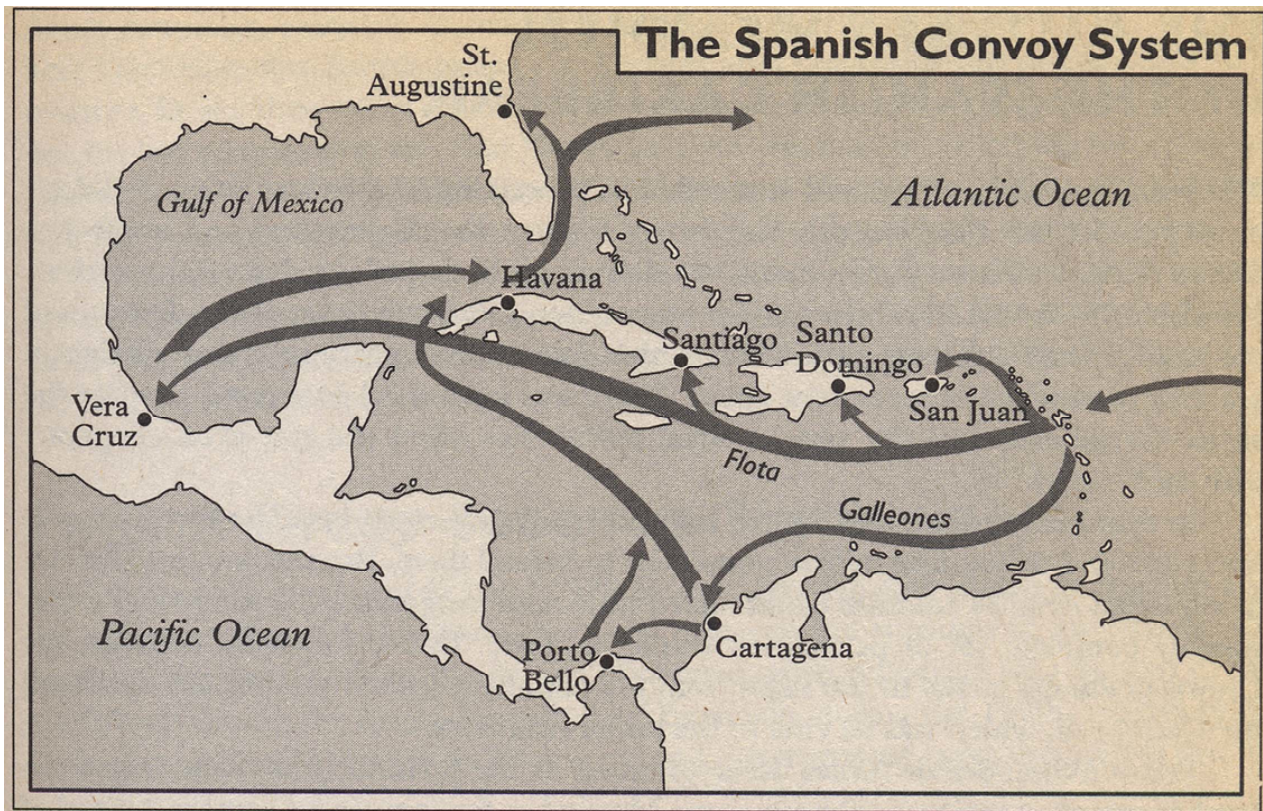


Fig. 2.2 The Spanish Convoy System (Rogozinski 2000: 39)

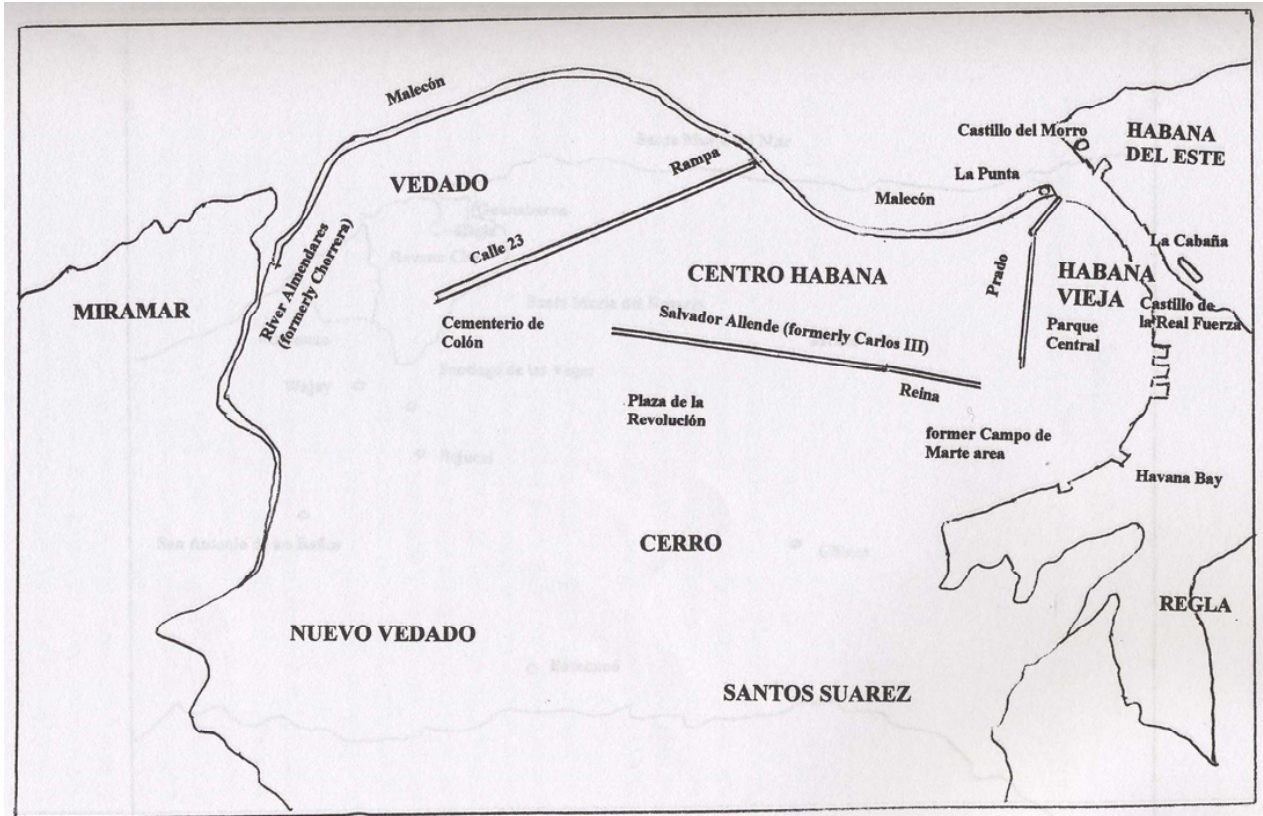


Fig. 2.3 Map of Havana A (Kapcia 2005: xvii)

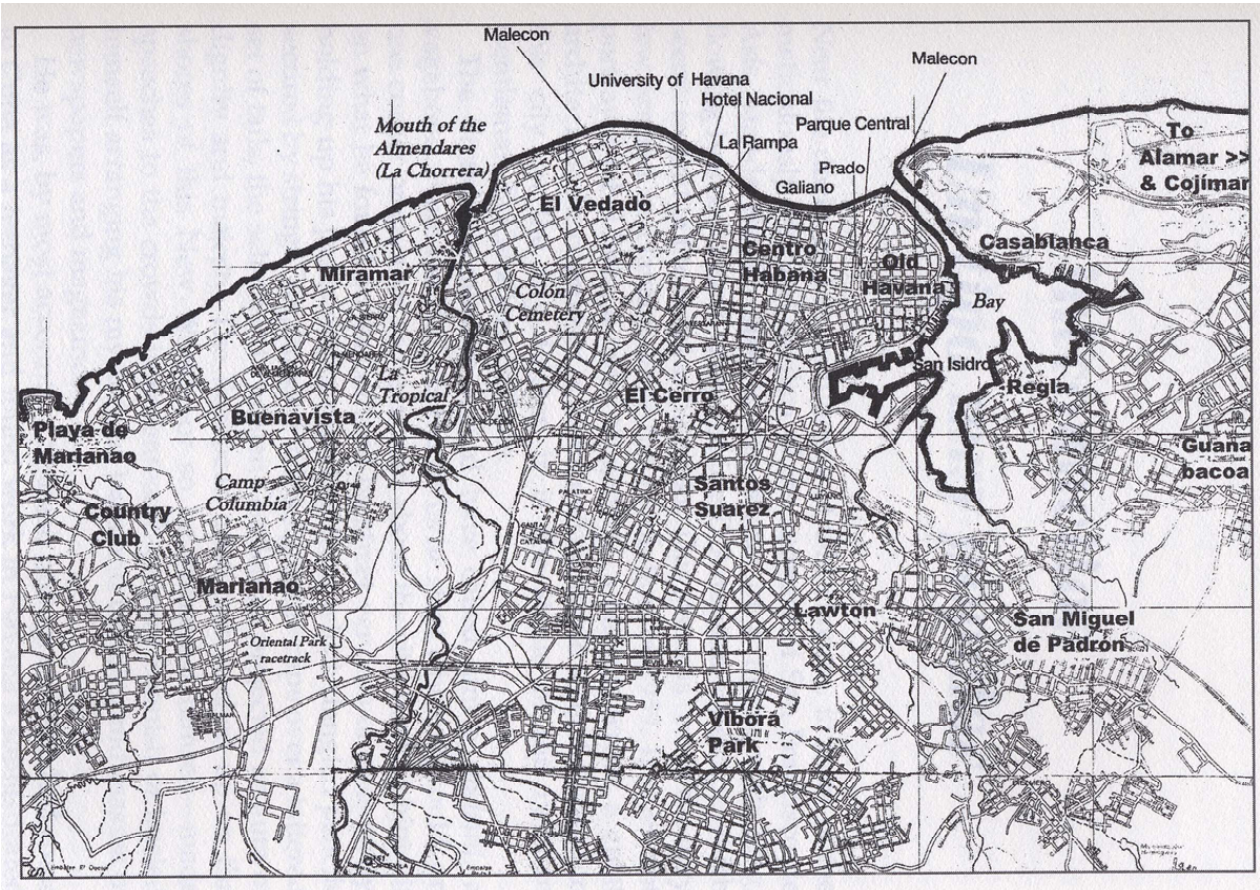


Fig. 2.4 Map of Havana B (Cluster and Hernández 2006: xi)



Fig. 2.5 Habana Vieja (Old Havana)



Fig. 2.6 Centro Habana

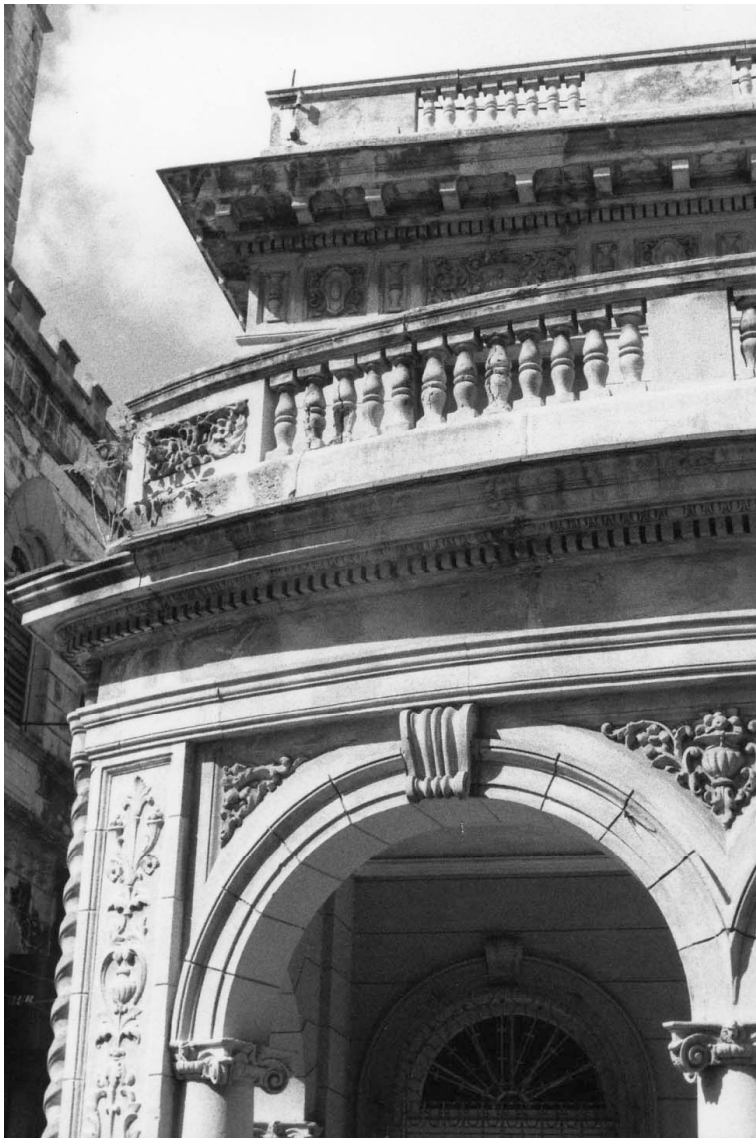


Fig. 2.7 Vedado



Fig. 2.8 Regla



Fig. 2.9 Malecón

Chapter 3

Timba Brava: Maroon Music in Cuba

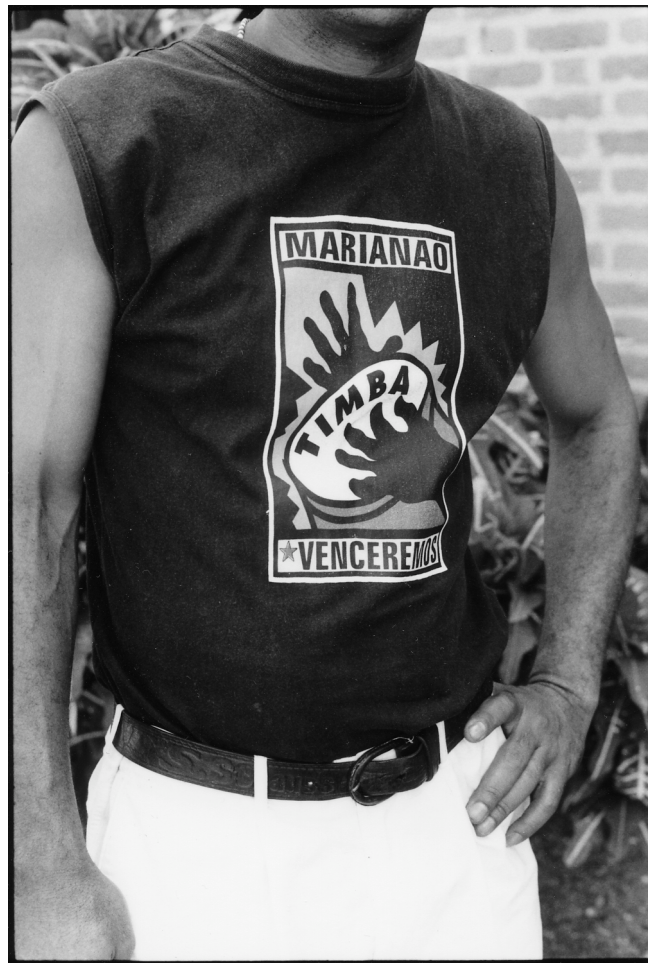


Fig. 3.0 Timba Brava

Chapter 3

Timba Brava: Maroon Music in Cuba

“Yo traigo la verdad, pa’ tí y pa’ tu mamá...”

“I bring the truth, for you and your mother too...”

—José Luis Cortés El Tosco (a chorus from his song “Masca la cachimba”)

Nowadays all acknowledge the boom of Cuban popular dance music that occurred at the opening of the 1990s and maintained itself until the closing of that decade²⁷.

During that period the musical practices, instrumentation, treatments of traditional themes, and all new thematic content based on emergent realities, in short the sound that was born (having, of course, roots in previous epochs) formed a legitimate and new kind of popular music, first called “Cuban salsa”, then “timba”²⁸. This chapter describes timba and argues that it is an important phenomenon where several processes and social debates in Cuba intersect: specifically I look at economic policy, identity formation, gender roles, and especially race struggle. Definitions of the term timba itself give clues to its nature as both a musical genre and as a form of social action.

²⁷ David Calzado, director of La Charanga Habanera, says that the 1990s represent one of several golden eras of Cuban music, and that it waned due to saturation of the public. Paulito F.G. contends that that period represents a special moment because of the fertile production of numerous, restless, young musicians that were impelled to fuse Cuban music with other international styles. Nevertheless he blames disorganization and inexperience in matters of business on the very part of the young *timberos*, and cites lack of promotion and distribution support as reasons that this golden moment came to an end. These criteria and others will be discussed more in depth below. Ned Sublette (2004: 433) also hails the late 1980s and 1990s as one of several golden ages in Cuban music.

²⁸ Here timba will be used, already the term of preference among musicians and scholars because it emphasizes the uniqueness of contemporary popular dance music from Cuba.

Fernando Ortiz suggests that ‘timbá’ is onomatopoeia—like batá, tambó, etc.—replicating the sound of drums (1994: 8). Timba was an old word that in the Spanish army used to mean a group of gamblers—deriving from the word timbal, because they would use the kettledrum as a card table (Sublette 2004: 272). In the solares of Havana and Matanzas during the 19th century, a meeting of men with drums and rum, synonymous with rumba de solar, one of the roughest, “of the people” (*del pueblo*) manifestations of rumba; “¡la timba se ha puesto bueno!” (this joint is jumpin’) (García Meralla 1997). Here we see rumba or timba as a kind of fiesta or social activity which would always include food, drink, song, dance, drums, invited guests from the neighborhood, etc. (Acosta 2004: 40; Sublette 2004). Roy tells us “timba and timbero are expressions that appear frequently in the context of the rumba, exclamations with which one called out to the drummers, to encourage them...” (Roy 2002: 180). Not only does timba imply sound, but also people (especially marginalized people) and collective action²⁹.

Guava paste eaten with bread as an inexpensive snack called “pan con timba” is another common usage in Cuba. Timba also means “belly” (*vientre*) and refers, some say, to the feminine energy of the drum, pregnant with sound and power. It is delicious and full of possibilities. Los Papines first recorded the term; “I like to hear a bolero, guaracha, or son montuno if it has timba, bonkó³⁰” (interview with Luis Hernández

²⁹ This idea of lower-class blacks being more culturally invested in music and dance is reiterated throughout this piece, by my informants, and by many writers. It may seem stereotypical and implausible, but there is something to it. In Cuba, “popular music has long been dominated by people of color” because music was considered an unstable, even immoral line of work. According to Alejo Carpentier, the scarcity of musicians and the need for music made it impossible to discriminate against blacks in this profession, even within the Catholic Church (Carpentier 1946: 38). Throughout the colonial period, much if not most of the European military and religious music on the island was performed by blacks and mulatos. By 1831 there were three times more black musicians than whites (Leymarie 2002: 10). “Blacks and mulatos filled the working class positions of street vendors, tailors, cooks, silversmiths, *musicians*, stevedores, etc. that upper-class whites found demeaning, and lower-class whites were unable or unwilling to do” (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 50, emphasis mine). According to Helio Orovio, “For many years almost all [professional] musical activity was carried on by blacks” (Orovio 1984: 181). This strong identification of blacks with music does not also imply lack of ability, interest, or achievement in other areas.

³⁰ These are all genres of Cuban music. The song is called “Clave para un timbero”: ‘Bonkó’ is an African derived word that means friend. The chorus of the song is “salsa pa ’quí, timba pa llá para los rumberos”

Abreu 2003). Timba is Arsenio Rodríguez³¹ and Benny Moré (García Meralla 1997). There is timba in the swaying stride of Cuban women, in any neighborhood sidewalk, and even in the desire of foreigners to imitate the way Cubans dance (Ibid.). These references to El Benny, Arsenio, and the swaying hips of Cuban women invoke notions of essential Afro-Cuban male and female energy. Issues of race, class, and gender are worked out through timba.

Timba is also a jam session with percussive piano and horns, mixing in jazz, a great deal of son and, to round it all off, bass guitar that takes on the voice and musical vocabulary of rumba³² (Ibid.). Many Cuban musicians, including Angel Bonne, David Calzado, and César Pedrosa refer to occasions when they played this way during breaks while studying at the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) or Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA). They agree too that timba is Cuban dance music in its highest degree of development, made contemporary by incorporating popular music from around the world (interview with David Calzado 2003). Timba is the transposition and extension of Cuba's musical roots, in a new era, accentuated by different harmonic concepts and different technologies (Roy 2002: 200). Some identify timba with abstract values like "strength" (interview with Bamboleo 2003), referring on one hand to its sound; but also to the way Cubans rely on music as sustenance ("strength") to carry on under difficult circumstances.

One of the best timba bands is Manolito y su 'Trabuco'—which literally means a firearm from the times of the independence war of 1895, and figuratively refers to anything forceful or strong (interview with Manolito Simonet 2003). According to Roy,

(salsa over here, timba over there for all the rumberos) (interview with Luis Abreu Hernández of Los Papines).

³¹ Born in the small town of Güira de Macurije in Matanzas province in 1911, the grandson of a slave brought from the Congo, his birth name was Ignacio Arsenio Travieso Scull, but he was professionally known as Arsenio Rodríguez (Sublette 2004: 442; Orovio 1992: 388). For years in the 1940s dancers would go to La Tropical to dance to his rhythm.

³² This took place often in the context of break time for students at ENA or ISA, prohibited from playing popular music, but who did it anyway (interview with César 'Pupy' Pedrosa 2003).

“originally timba designated the marginalized neighborhoods of large cities” (Roy 2002: 180). La Timba is a working class neighborhood in Havana, evolved from a shantytown on the outskirts of prosperous Vedado (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002: 73). The famous *rumbero* Chano Pozo was born in a tenement (*solar*) called Pan con Timba (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 146). Timba is a “Cuban attitude toward music and dance” (García Meralla 1997), and a social movement or subculture (Perna 2005). Leymarie calls this music “nueva timba”, and identifies it as an expression derived “from the word timba designating a conga” (Leymarie 2002: 253). Whether she means the conga drum (*tumbadora*) or the drum rhythm and procession from eastern Cuba, the connection makes sense. She emphasizes that, in regard to contemporary dance music, it was coined by Juan Formell as Cuba’s answer to *salsa*³³, which had long been rejected by many on the island as an imperialist product (Ibid.). Timba is the “convergence of politics and pleasure” (Aparicio 1998: 92).

As a musical style/genre³⁴ timba helps mark identity and is closely related to associated cultural features such as recreational activities, use of language, attitudes toward sex, and so on, which similarly contribute to forming and maintaining group identity. It is intrinsically related to the social context in which it has developed and takes place. The discernible patterns that distinguish timba reflect cultural meanings shared (and possibly contested) by all those who participate in a communicative event such as musical performance. These meanings are related in fundamental ways to conceptions of identity—the way people perceive and define themselves, especially in relation to other groups. The corollary to this is that social change is reflected in stylistic

³³ In her book *Cuban Fire* about the development of Cuban music in Cuba, the U.S., and Puerto Rico, Isabelle Leymarie calls salsa “urban Cuban-derived music from the Spanish Caribbean, a compendium of rhythms and dances, among them boleros, mambos, sones, guarachas, merengues, bombas, plenas, cumbias, and other Caribbean variations” (2002: 5). She notes how with the worldwide success of this music Cuban musicians finally co-opted the term.

³⁴ If a genre is considered a category of music, while a style is a way of making music, then timba can be considered a style. Its first being called Cuban salsa (situating it as a modality under the umbrella category salsa) suggests that this is correct. (For more on style see Coplan 1985, Royce 1982, Mañuel Peña 1985, Keil 1966, Waterman 1985.)

change. These alterations will reveal survival strategies as well as the perceptions and values of the social group experiencing the change (Pacini-Hernández 1995: 18).

Considering both journalistic and academic writings about timba, one perceives the surprise, frenzy, scandal, rejection, and passion that this movement has aroused, and also the acceptance—still contested—that it finally seems to have earned. The discourse on timba places it as a brash music, threatening for various reasons, but at once respected for its virtuosity, daring, and success. Like Caliban (Retamar 2000) timba appropriates language (both spoken and musical) to express its subaltern perspective. It is a musical performance that has created “a resistant space beyond the realm of politics in which rebelliousness of various sorts or identifications with alternate ideologies may be emphasized” (Moore 2006: 8). It is part of an “unruly musical wave that exploded in Havana in the late 1980s” (Sublette 2004: 272). This uneasy relationship of popular music with the state has existed since colonial times, and only assumed new details after the triumph of the revolution. The tension is caused by the fact that popular music is made by individuals and groups (to some extent) independent of the state, “and in some cases in opposition to it” (Ibid.).

Virtuosi musicians often come from, and are still rooted and producing in the marginal barrios of Havana. Few people would dare attack the skill of timba musicians, trained as many of them are in the country’s best schools. Nevertheless some view ambivalently the use of skills developed through study at state-run schools to make music perceived as vulgar, shamelessly commercial, or simply too black. (Imagine if the architects of early hip-hop were conservatory trained!) As we explore timba and social action in Cuban dance spaces, it is important to recall José Martí’s claim that to be Cuban is more than black, white, or mulato. He insisted that there is no such thing as race; that it was merely a tool used locally to divide the anti-colonial effort and globally by men who invented “textbook races” in order to justify expansion and empire (Ferrer 1999: 4). One aim of his work was to persuade white Cubans to drop their fear of blacks (Brock

and Castañeda 1998: 128). Cuba's mulato poet Nicolás Guillén extended Martí's ideas about racial unity in Cuba claiming that, "Cuba's soul is mestizo, and it is from the soul, not the skin, that we derive our definite color. Someday it will be called 'Cuban color'" (de la Fuente 2001: 182). We will see how timba is survival music emanating from Cuba's black communities inspired by Martí's and Guillén's ideal of racial equality and fusion. Timba seeks integration, not separation, through sound.

A long tradition of mixed music

Timba is "música mulata", as Puerto Rican sociologist Ángel Quintero Rivera would say; a fusion of multiple elements in which it is difficult to distinguish and separate the ingredients, so well integrated are they in the final product. Danilo Orozco has coined the term "intergénero", or "between-genre", to describe timba: "a concrete hybrid that has been nourished by a very dynamic and specific mixture of juxtaposed elements in constant tension, which does not permit untangling the components (Orozco: 4)". Musical "alchemists" (García Meralla 1997) blend many influences: rumba, son, Afro-Cuban ritual music, jazz, songo, Puerto Rican bomba, North American folk music, reggae, Caribbean and New York salsa, hip hop, rock, funk, samba and European classical music (Orovio 1998). Cuban pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba, renowned as a jazzman but who also participates in important popular dance music projects (very notably with Issac Delgado), says that "of all the music in the world Cuban music is among the most capable of assimilating influences of other cultures and sounds without losing its own authenticity, rather enriching it" (interview with Gonzalo Rubalcaba 2001).

The popular dance music of Cuba in general has a long tradition of fusion, demonstrated by hybrid forms, mulato styles. Danzón, for example, melded derivations of the English country-dance, French contredanse, and Spanish contradanza with

contributions from Afrocubans and black Haitian immigrants to create the first truly Cuban music form. In his novel *Cecilia Valdés*, even without the congas, clave, cowbells, etc. that would enliven later genres, Cirilo Villaverde describes the “moaning” character of danzón as “from the heart of a people enslaved” (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 55). (Danzón is mentioned as the traditional Cuban dance par excellence in the constitution.) The fusion that makes timba is equally dramatic and diverse of sources. Figuratively, timba is what happens when various “worlds” make contact—local and foreign, “high” and “low” class, socialist and capitalist, black and white, etc. Timba, like salsa and other music from the Black Atlantic, is a “sociomusical practice claimed by diverse communities for radically diverse purposes” (Aparicio 1998:67). Specific factors affecting the content and performance of timba, its development and boom, include: a long tradition of black popular music in Cuba, excellent musicians trained under the Revolution, economic and social crisis during the special period, new approaches to international visitors and trade markets, and revitalized debate on race relations.

The evolution of Cuban dance music before timba

The earliest forms of uniquely Cuban music were enriched by African and European sources (Carpentier 1946; Alén 1999), which merged on the island to create totally native creole forms through an ongoing process of transculturation (Ortiz 1995; Morejón 1988: 188). For example, nourished by Yoruba, Bantu, and Spanish roots, Cuban rumba evolved by the mid 1800s as a popular music/song/dance complex among poor urban blacks. Rumba functioned as a site where oral histories were constructed, protests raised, and diversion from life’s hardships found. Many Cubans rejected rumba because of its African sound—the musical ensemble consisting of clave, three drums or

boxes, a lead singer (*el gallo*) and a chorus—and the overt sexual references of the dance. Although it was a form created and developed primarily by black Cubans, because rumba took place in marginalized spaces, some poor whites participated too.

Haitian colonials and their slaves, who had fled the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution of 1791, introduced the French contredanse in Cuba. The Cuban version of the music was similar to Spanish contradanza and French contredanse. However, the addition of African percussion instruments—güiro (a serrated gourd scraped with a stick) and timbal, plus a slower cadence gave it a different, decidedly Caribbean feeling, and received severe criticism during its early days. This fits Roy's description of Cuban music as the "creolization" of a European musical foundation under the influence of musicians of African origin³⁵ (Roy 2002: 2). After Miguel Failde—a Blackman and devotee of Afro-Cuban religion—"invented" danzón in 1879, commentaries in Cuban newspapers attacked it as "diabolical" and "contrary to Christianity" because of its association with "prostitution and improper race mixing" (Carpentier 1946: 27). It was not until later in the 1920s and 1930s that *mestizaje* (race mixing) would be accepted as a root of Cuban culture, though that reality was already long present in the island.

Though it was played before (perhaps as early as the 1800s), son came to Havana from Eastern Cuba in the early 20th century, and by the 1920s emerged as a genre of international importance. Like earlier forms, it was criticized as too wild, barbaric, etc. The dance step was described as "lascivious" and dangerous! Robin Moore (1997) and Leonardo Acosta (1989) remind us that danzón and son were initially repudiated for being black, and then later appropriated by the dominant, white classes that had rejected them. Danzón and son were eventually used to represent cubanness and to defend the national culture against the influence of jazz and tango that invaded the island in the 1920s. In their day, when Arcaño y sus maravillas mixed danzón and son, and Arsenio

³⁵ This is by no means true for all styles of Cuban music. Other genres like rumba and comparsa are "creolizations" of African musical traditions, which were influenced by Spanish music in Cuba.

Rodríguez developed the orchestra format called conjunto (incorporating the conga drum), both were criticized for their “música negra” and relegated to play in marginal spaces due to the color of their skin³⁶. Even still, son remains the strongest reference point for all Cuban dance music produced since. This love-hate relationship with black music and black people has helped shape timba, which, like any good son of *son*, has grown and claimed its space despite initial rejection.

The influence of African American jazz started to show up in Cuban music during the 1930s when Latin jazz bands began incorporating instrumentation and arrangement ideas from Count Basie, Duke Ellington and others (Moore 1997; Roberts 1979). Jazz strongly influenced Cuban musicians—such as the López brothers, Armando Romeu, Pedro “Peruchín” Justiz, Chico O’Farril, Bebo Valdés, and El Niño Rivera—who through their work in the Cuban jazz band format mixed North American jazz with Cuban flavor. These bands played all genres of dance music (guaracha, lindy hop, son, etc.), and introduced Cuban percussion in jazz, opening the way for AfroCuban or Latin jazz, led by Dámaso Pérez Prado in Mexico and Frank “Machito” Grillo, Mario Bauzá, Chano Pozo and Dizzy Gillespie in New York in the 1940s and 50s. Cuban music and bebop became “cubop...a marriage of love” (Leymarie 2002: 2). In the 1940s, riding the wave of the big band sound, mambo emerged, also led by Pérez Prado, spawning a craze that swept the U.S. and Western Europe. Cuban popular dance music since that time has cultivated the jazz root, cubanizing it in the process to develop the musical language of timba. The sassy horn licks of the past became the *mambos* and *champolas* that make timba so rich and exciting today.

³⁶ In the case of Arsenio Rodríguez this is also due to his way of playing, described as “rowdier and blacker” than other styles in Cuba (Roberts 1979: 9). For the dancers of New York (no doubt different from those of Cuba) his rhythm was too difficult for white dancers to follow, “you had to be Cuban, a good dancer, and on top of that black [to really follow his beat] because it was very slow” (interview with Mario Bauzá in Padura 1997: 41). From the 1930s many black musicians, having been victims of racism, went outside Cuba to seek their fortunes (Leymarie 2002: 9). The immigration of musicians Mario Bauzá in the 1930s, Chano Pozo in the 1940s, and Arsenio Rodríguez in the 1950s to the U.S. was due at least partly to the limitations facing blacks in Cuba (D’Rivera 1998: 140).

In the 1950s, Enrique Jorrín created chachachá based on the rhythm he heard in dancers' footsteps (López 1997). This style was so popular that it remained current into the 1960s, inspiring a North American version of the dance, and cha interpretations by North American artists like Nat "King" Cole. Despite the popularity of Cuban music in the states, its continued development was largely hidden from North American listeners due to the U.S. trade embargo imposed on Cuba in 1962. Revolutionary policy on the Island affected the development of music in significant ways as well.

Focusing on ending crime and prostitution, the Revolution curbed much of the Havana nightlife that supported the development of dance music (Acosta 1999: 9). As a result of the closure of most of the city's clubs and theaters, musical innovation languished. Also many musicians put down their instruments to take on other important work of the Revolution—like cutting sugar cane (interview with Armando Valdés 2003). During the 1960s several rhythms were introduced but none with the mass appeal or longevity of son or cha. Each incorporated elements of conga, iyesá, and influences from Venezuelan merengue, while keeping elements of son and mambo (Acosta 2004: 141). The *pachanga* by Eduardo Davidson, *pa' cá* by Juanito Marquez, *pilón* by Pacho Alonso and Enrique Bonne, *dengue* by Pérez Field and Roberto Faz, and *Mozambique* by Pello el Afrokan each made a splash, but failed to achieve international, or even extended national, popularity (Acosta 1999). Each was a rhythm with its own dance step. Despite their limited success, they do exemplify the tight link between music and dance that has been inherited by the timberos.

In the 1960s a new generation of singer-songwriters endeavored to create music that was "different from [popular dance music] produced before the Revolution". In their view, Cuban music had been too focused on "love, dark cafes, bars, etc." and had not given enough attention to meaningful lyrics (Sarusky 2004: 10). They wanted to counteract what they perceived as banality and commercialism in Cuban music of the 1950s (Benmayor 1981: 14). They took inspiration from turn-of-the-century trovadores

(troubadours) like Sindo Garay, who pioneered a style called *canción*, known for beautiful, socially engaged lyrics sung to guitar accompaniment. The new movement came to be called Nueva Canción or Nueva Trova. Its mission was to create new, poetic music of the future, opposed to what was considered “bar music” of the past (op cit.: 18).

Singer-songwriters like Pablo Milanés, Silvio Rodríguez, Sara González, and Amaury Pérez recorded prolifically and toured widely throughout Latin America. They collaborated with rock and jazz musicians and composers like Leo Brouwer, Sergio Vitier, and Leonardo Acosta. Their records were the first in Cuba *not* to specify a particular dance rhythm (53). By the end of the 1960s the pioneers of Nueva Canción founded Grupo de Experimentación Sonora, with the specific mission of analyzing and transforming the Cuban musical repertory³⁷. They criticized popular music as too “imitative” and static, because untrained musicians made it and transmitted it by ear. Rhythms and melodies were overly dominant, while texts “did not exist”. Despite instances of state censorship (Saruský 2004) the musicians of the Nueva Trova became “cultural ambassadors of the Revolution...a voice for new values” (Benmayor 1981: 11, 13).

1968 is a turning point. In that year all the nightclubs and parlors of Havana close for at least one year (as if acting on the critiques by the Nueva Trova movement). Nevertheless several dance orchestras are born that would be important for the new musical language they elaborate, and which would later be taken up and extended by the *timberos*. Elio Revé y su Charangón is founded in 1968, and gains popularity based on changes imposed by then-member Juan Formell, modernizing *changüí* (a proto-son rhythm from Guantánamo) under the influence of jazz, *filin*, the son compositions of Benny Moré and Chapottín, and the rock and roll of the Beatles.

³⁷ The group was inspired in large part by the musical movement called Tropicalismo, led by stars like Chico Buarque, Gilberto Gil, and Caetano Veloso in Brazil (Saruský 2004: 65). GES also made avant-garde soundtracks for new Cuban films of the time, incorporating various styles and technologies into their recordings.

In 1969 Juan Formell splits with Revé and founds Los Van Van. They introduced a new style called *songo* and were among the first and definitely the most successful in incorporating rock and roll, synthesizers, drum machines, sound effects, and new harmonic concepts in Cuban dance music (González 1999: 51-2), making an early step toward today's timba sound. Harmonies for guitar and flute in fourths, rock and roll style breaks on the snare drum, jazz electric flute alongside traditional five-hole flute, and a violin section that emphasized rhythm over harmony are examples of how Los Van Van reinterpreted tradition (Ibid.). Perhaps their best-known instrumental innovation has been the incorporation of trombones to the charanga format.

Speaking of Los Van Van and its contributions Orozco mentions a peculiar way of combining violins and flutes, subtle harmonic approaches based on the blues, vocal emissions that evoke something of the American quartets of the 1960s and the ethos of the soul singer, overtones of pop-rock, and a dynamic, varied sense of rhythm and time. According to Loyola Fernández, Van Van's rhythmic-harmonic interweaving of percussion, bass guitar, and piano with freer, more figurative interpretation of tumbaos³⁸ and polyrhythmic percussion was definitely a precursor of today's timba. In the case of Los Van Van and their *songo*³⁹, perhaps due to the passage of time, their innovations have been accepted because they constitute “a style that brings the music closer to the

³⁸ The tumbao is utilized here, following Danilo Orozco, to refer to the fundamental ride that provides the driving base of any son music. It is established by instruments such as the tres, bass, and keyboards that give son its character, relying on subtle interrelations among all the elements of the group, in which the vocalist or any instrument improvises in contrast to and interplay with the basic march, or tumbao. In the 1930s, the relation between the bass and specific patterns of the tres was prominent. In the 1940-50s and subsequently, the juxtaposition of the bass-piano tumbao with peculiar horn passages in jazz bands, or with complimentary violin patterns in brass bands, became popular (Orozco: 9). César Pupy Pedroso, master pianist and composer, former-member of Los Van Van, and present director of Pupy y los que son, son, creates his tumbao based on the requirements of the dancers, working above all with piano, bass, and tumbadora (interview 2003).

³⁹ The rhythm called *songo* is a variation of son characterized by “a particular way of internalizing the beat”, especially with respect to the tumbao established between the conga drums, trap set, piano, and bass. It was pioneered by members of the important group Los Van Van—Raúl Cárdenas ‘El Yulo’, Luis Quintana Changuito, César ‘Pupy’ Pedroso, and Juan Formell respectively. Though new, *songo* was widely accepted by the dancing public because it offers a series of elements that identify it with patterns familiar to Cuban dancers; that is, it did not abandon, but rather extended the tradition of son (Unpublished thesis by Neris González; interview with José Luis Quintana ‘Changuito’ 2003).

contemporary dancers, moving within a modern framework of tones more relevant in the musical context of their sociocultural environment”. They are emblematic of the evolution of Cuban dance music: they innovate and enrich, always honoring *la clave*, never abandoning *el son*.

In 1973, Irakere is founded under the leadership of pianist Chucho Valdés and contributes elements that open new horizons for popular dance music. They incorporate Afro-Cuban religious instruments (batá drums, chequeré, agogó, etc.) until then used only in ceremonies, or on occasion in a few cabaret shows, or academic demonstrations. Among the contributions of Irakere to popular dance music which have been expanded in timba Helio Orovio names the jazz piano of Chucho Valdés, the harmonic-unorthodox guitar of Carlos Emilio, the jazz-reggae guitar of Carlos del Puerto, the conga rumbera of Jorge Alfonso, the trap drum playing of Enrique Plá and the jazzy attack of saxophones and trumpets so characteristic of the group and members like Arturo Sandoval and Paquito D’Rivera. Irakere changed the horn format to two trumpets and two saxophones, the pattern followed by many timba orchestras. Los Van Van and Irakere developed the format and playing style of dance band horn sections, borrowing concepts from U.S. funk and soul bands like Parliament and Earth, Wind, and Fire.

Los Van Van and Irakere enjoy great popularity throughout the 1970s and 80s during the height of the New York salsa movement. Despite the U.S. embargo against Cuba, and the stance of old-guard Cuban musicians (Padura 1997; interview with Padura 2003) and the government (Perna 2005) against this “refashioning or co-opting” of vintage Cuban music, there was contact between salseros from New York and Latin America (in Cuba called salsa “from the outside”) and Cuban popular musicians on the island. For example in the late 1970s and early 1980s there were visits made to Cuba by Fania All-stars, Típica 73, Dimensión Latina, and Óscar D’León. Willie Colón and Rubén Blades were played on Cuban radio.

Cuban bandleaders like Juan Formell and Adalberto Álvarez made format and recording adjustments based on influences from New York salsa (Formell 2002)⁴⁰. According to Acosta, the young musicians accepted it and they exchanged ideas and experiences with the salseros of the Caribbean and New York. In fact, Formell recognizes that the leveling of the various tracks that make up his recordings originates from the style used by the salseros from New York that situate the drums almost as prominently as the solo voice, a strategy that provokes the dancer. At the same time he denies that the trombones of his orchestra have anything to do with Willie Colón (famous for his trombone sound) or any another salsero. Rather, he says he added them to compensate for a deficiency in the middle range inherent to the charanga format (Ibid.).

Adalberto always stayed informed about the latest developments in New York and Caribbean salsa; in his words it was his “obsession”, and he determined to use elements of that style to avoid making music that was too local. He always conceived his musical production to please dancers throughout the Caribbean and the world and considered it crucial artistically to compose with the sound of the other salsa in mind. Also the fact that many salseros were winning popularity using his compositions convinced him to enter that market with his own orchestra appropriating elements from its best exponents (Padura 1997).

Percussionist Yoel Driggs “The Showman”, former-member of Los Van Van and current musical director of Puro Sabor, told me that he owes a great deal of his own artistic personality and charisma to his experience playing with the great Venezuelan salsero Óscar D’león, on his legendary trip to Cuba in 1983 (interview 2003). This was a “turning point” that reawakened young people’s interest in Cuban popular music, now

⁴⁰ Adjustments have been made based on encounters with music from other parts of the African Diaspora as well. Hugo “Mundele” Morejón from Los Van Van says that they incorporated synthesizers to augment what had been a “soft” charanga sound in order to compete with French Caribbean bands like Kassav (interview 2003). Of course, hip-hop influenced their incorporation of the electronic drum pad.

with a fresh new sound (Leymarie 2002: 173). Clearly the *timberos* with their subaltern voice and unique flavor owe something to the other salsa as well.

All of the styles discussed so far were created and practiced most widely and intensely by Cubans of color, and incorporated elements from other styles from the black diaspora⁴¹. Aragón traveled the world and became Cuba's number one band spreading the *chachachá*. Afro-Cuban or Latin jazz is heard everywhere and at the Cuban Jazz Festival. Timba is undergoing a similar process. It is heavily criticized as “uncouth”, “indelicate”, etc. (Casanella 1999), yet increasingly recognized as a valid genre rather than just a vulgar fad (Perna 2005). In 1999, Chucho Valdés told me “no pasa nada”, nothing is happening with timba (personal communication, October 1999). Nevertheless, at that time and even still, timba is heard everywhere in Cuba, and there have been government-commissioned “national anthems” in timba style—for example, “Aquí estamos, los cubanos” (Here we are, the Cubans) on Cuban television. Chucho's Irakere (reincarnated in the 1990s sometimes as a dance band after a long time embracing mostly jazz) has recorded timba numbers, and in 2003 he honored *timbero* Paulito F.G. by performing with him at his (Paulito's) record-release concert at the Karl Marx Theater in Havana.

African and Caribbean Music

Many authors have discussed the existence of certain components found across a wide array of music and performance practices from Africa and its Diaspora (Carpentier 1946; Chernoff 1979; Merriam 1960; Ortiz 1965; Bilby 1985; Rivera 2003). It comes as no surprise that these sociomusical concepts are present in timba because it was created by Afro-Cubans in dialogue mostly with other African musics: “la musique moderne” of

⁴¹ Many of the genres from which timba borrows have themselves been rejected by some as immoral, inelegant, degenerate, or even anti-nation. Tango, cumbia, reggae, merengue, samba, son, and hip-hop have each come to be recognized as signature rhythms of their respective nations (Savigliano 1995; Wade 2000; Cooper 2004; Austerlitz 1997 and Pacini-Hernández 1995; Guillermprieto 1995; Moore 1997; Rose 1999).

Zaire, jazz, funk and hip-hop from the U.S., Brazilian samba, Jamaican reggae, and so on. A few concepts set out by Peter Manuel (1995) are useful to understanding timba.

Collective participation is a characteristic applicable to timba events in which musicians and audience/dancers are mutually dependent, locked in a complimentary relationship that makes the performance “happen”. If a band’s sound is uninspiring then no one dances. If there is no dance, then even if the musicians continue to play *there is no musical event*. As in many African and Caribbean contexts music, song, and dance form a complex whole. Emphasis on rhythm is important in timba⁴².

One of the most important characteristics of timba is call and response. In this structure improvised *inspiraciones* from a lead singer alternate and interact textually with a refrain repeated by a chorus. Casanella has noted a kind of linguistic dialogue between singers and the public (see below). I argue that there is a dialogue, a performative group conversation, taking place in the dance spaces under consideration here. Collective participation, call and response, and total atmosphere combine to establish behaviors, which are used strategically to create one’s identity. These behaviors are performed beyond the strictly musical event in every day life too. In this way the performances—behaviors, interactions—in the dance spaces actively *produce*, just as much as they reflect, the contours and choreography of social relations in Cuba today.

Timba: a way of making music

The instrumentation of timba bands and the particular ways of executing specific instruments in timba reveal increased timbric resources, and enriched expressive and technical arsenals for arrangers, allowing greater possibilities for the music in general. It

⁴² Percussion in timba is arguably more intense and complex than in other Latin musics like merengue or Newyoricana salsa. Each instrument in the ensemble is played in a percussive manner, drummers are allowed more freedom to improvise, and a trap drum set is added to the usual Latin ensemble of timbal, conga, and bongó. The very name timba, with its connections to rumba, suggests the “determinant role of percussion in the complete fusion of [timba] orchestrations” (Roy 2002: 180). In these dance spaces there are many identities being improvised and negotiated at the speed of jazz.

is important to note that there is not a fixed or obligatory format to play timba. In fact, changüí groups or charangas (for example the famous Orquesta Aragón) play this style, using the traditional instrumentation for their respective formats. This suggests the lasting effect timba may have on Cuban popular dance music in general. Throughout Havana small groups entertain at bars and restaurants performing traditional son integrated with clear inflections of timba in their arrangements. For example, at a local bar called Siete Mares (the seven seas), a quintet with bongó, flute, guitar, violin, and a singer played traditional Cuban music for most of the evening, including songs by Benny Moré, Pablo Milanés, Elena Bourke, etc. They would regularly infuse these numbers with timba style breakdowns, using the same acoustic instrumentation in a different way.

Following Charles Kiel's analysis of the blues (1966) and Deborah Pacini-Hernández' discussion of bachata (1995) I will look at timba in terms of four main stylistic elements: structure, timbre and texture, content, and context.

Structure

Orchestras like those of El Médico de la Salsa and Paulito F.G. incorporate the electric guitar utilized at times in rock style solos, while the group Dan Den of Juan Carlos Alfonso distinguished itself by adding a set of bells originating from the rural outskirts of Havana⁴³. These changes in instrumentation correspond to sources in jazz and rock (the drums, the keyboard, the electric guitar played rock style a la Carlos Santana), Afrocuban folk music (batá, agogó, etc.), and borrowings from earlier formats within Cuban popular music, such as the orquesta típica and the Cuban jazz band (trombone and sax).

⁴³ The name "Dan Den" refers to the sound of the bells that are emblematic of the group; they come from the folkloric charanga groups from Bejucal, a rural area of southern Havana Province. Areas outside of Havana City are called "Habana campo".

In timba the traditional organization and interpretation of sections of song compositions “introduction, exposition and montuno” is altered. Challenging this configuration, arrangers often displace the introduction and begin with a rap or a short tease of the estribillo, or chorus, to be introduced later in the montuno of the song. At times the presence of estribillos throughout compositions, right from the start, separated by song verses or spoken sections by soloists make the entire piece sound like one extended montuno. At times songs are voiced ensemble up until the montuno begins, at which time a soloist dialogues with the chorus. Sometimes the role of soloist is passed among the main singers of the orchestra right from the song’s opening.

There are four sections in timba: *la salsa*, which is of moderate tempo and performed by a soloist; *el montuno*, in which the tempo increases, a refrain is introduced and call and response begins; *los pedales*, where a hip-hop/R&B-like back beat is brought in, tempo recedes, and tension is increased with the bass guitar, as the soloist talks rhythmically, introducing the next (more dynamic) refrain. During these first sections most people dance *casino*. The next section is *el despelote* (the breakdown) where a rapped chorus answers the soloist, and both dancers and musicians go into a frenzy, inspired now by the percussive slapping and plucking of the bass guitar (a la Bootsy Collins). During this section people dance *reparto* (the neighborhood) and *tembleque* (the quake), which are discussed below. The band then returns to *el montuno*, *los pedales*, etc. at will to add new refrains (personal communication, La Charanga Forever 1999) and change the intensity of the performance. The image of a train climbing a hill (*la salsa*), pausing at its peak (*los pedales*), and rushing down (*el despelote*) gives a rough idea of how energy is manipulated over the course of a song. Each of the added chorus refrains can also be called *sobremontuno*, as in above and beyond the first. Compositions often end with a cool down, returning to the mellower salsa style used in the opening.

These changes opened the way for an attitude of free combination of instruments and ways of playing based on patterns from other music styles from the Caribbean,

(Black) North America, Brazil, etc. taking Cuban son and rumba as points of departure for experimentation.

Timbre and Texture

Musician Orderquis Revé, brother of the late great Elio Revé, says that “without changüí there is no son, and without son there is no salsa” (sin changüí no hay son, sin son no hay salsa) (interview with Orderquis Revé 2002), and master Luis Abreu Hernández of Los Papines says that without rumba, without clave and tumbadora (conga drums) timba does not exist (interview with Luís Abreu Hernández 2003). Describing timba in general Orozco emphasizes the predominance of the clave from rumba-guaguancó (2-3) at times substituted by the clave of son (3-2) or other related patterns that appear sometime at various points within the same composition. Generally there is a tendency to vary and to fragment phrases, lyrics, and choruses, illustrated by the use of the bass guitar, which no longer marks the stable pattern-tumbao associated with Cuban son but instead attacks in a disjointed way that is still graceful in its propulsion of the music and the dancers. The classical tumbao of the son⁴⁴ has been left behind, replaced now by phrases more related to reggae and funk, by their harmonic progression and their rhythmic attack, but nevertheless remain very Cuban and danceable with steps derived from the son.

Casanella and González also refer to the extreme fragmentation of the classical tumbao, the perennial counteraccentuations, and the juxtaposition of elements and planes with hard and tense sounds. More specifically they cite the rhythmic, percussive use of horns, their melodic execution of disjunct phrases, performed often in the sharpest, most strident registers, which gives timba its aggressive sound. As regards actual percussion

⁴⁴ The classic tumbao for son progresses harmonically I-IV-V-IV-I or alternately I-II-VI bimol-V-I (Fabián 1997). Rhythmically, emphasis is placed on the “and” of the second and fourth beats (Moore 1997).

instruments the authors underline the segmented polyrhythm of the different timbric layers, as well as a break from the timbric-expressive functions of previous eras, because now groups incorporate trap drums, congas, timbales with bass drum (*bombo*), bongó—all improvising freely—güiro, maracas, claves, chequeré, and bell. The piano part in this new tumbao is called *guajeo* (Leymarie 2002: 254), with a percussive attack enriched by jazz harmonies. The simple enumeration of so many elements gives an idea of the infinite combinations and effects possible rhythmically.

The variations in the patterns of the instruments mentioned cause a perceived acceleration, that can be real or only suggested. When we consider the rhythmic role of the horn section leading to climactic moments inside compositions, working in polyphony of incredible counterpoint and polyrhythm called “mambos” or “champolas” we have a formula to make dancers delirious. The horn section of NG La Banda is affectionately called “los metales del terror” or metals of terror. So important is the work of the horn section inside the timba format that this naming of the horn section itself has become common—take for example, “los metales de la salsa” of Issac Delgado, “Los chamacos” (the boys) of El Médico, “La zorra y el cuervo” (the fox and the raven) of Aramis Galindo, “Los metales de la élite” (the horns of the elite) of Paulito F.G., etc. that respond to exhortations such as “¡dále mambo!” (give it mambo/flavor/energy) or “¡champola pa’ tí!” (Take this horn lick). This tendency in timba is closely related to its roots in jazz.

In his composition “El secreto de la liga de mi son con rumba” (The secret of the link of my son with rumba) César Pedroso warns, “Don’t get confused, the secret I bring is the blend of son with rumba”. Certainly! And although the rumba has been recognized as an important source inside Cuban music, incorporated by Cuban composers of great renown such as Amadeo Roldán, Arsenio Rodríguez, Benny Moré, Pablo Milanés and others, besides being utilized for community projects-performances to promote solidarity among Cubans and to stimulate tourism (Rumba Saturday, El Callejón de Hamel, etc. see

Daniel 1995) the rumba continues to be a marginal music, whose penetration in the Cuban mainstream represents a transculturation with consequences for the recipient mainstream culture that is disturbed in assimilating and/or rejecting the new sounds, jive talk, and appearances/self-representations that enter it. This is also true for the marginal donor culture. It tastes the ethics of the market, feels the bitterness of rejection and repression, and, as a result, sometimes changes its own song.

The vocal style, in turn, is more emphatic as a result of the direct influence of rap with whole sections spoken in hip-hop style rather than sung in the way of the traditional Cuban sonero. The song style also has characteristics from rumba and black American R&B, especially in the phrasing and adornments that bend and play in between written notes. Casanella and González cite Mario “Mayito” Rivera, singer of Los Van Van, as an example par excellence of this first tendency (as was Óscar Valdés with Irakere in the previous generation). Singers Michel Maza (who set the vocal style still used by new members of La Charanga Habanera) and Ricardo “Amaray” Macías from Manolito y su Trabuco are good examples of the second tendency to use vocal riffs patterned after Luther Vandross, Keith Sweat, and other African American R&B and gospel stars.

Content

There are several general categories into which timba songs fall textually. Romantic songs, as in many other diasporic popular musics, deal with Western style, heterosexual relationships. Issac Delgado—an excellent salsero whose music exists at the frontier of timba and international salsa with influences from Puerto Rico, New York, and Colombia—sings in “Mi romántica”:

Ella es muy linda por fuera pero más bella por dentro
Donde están los sentimientos más sinceros del amor
Donde se resume la vida en un segundo
Donde se abre una flor, donde ha crecido el mundo...
(Chorus)

La niña más linda, la niña más bonita, la niña que yo quería
¿Quién lo diría?

She is very pretty, and even more beautiful within
Where the sincerest feelings of love are
Where life is summed up in a second
Where flowers bloom and the world grows
(Chorus)

The prettiest girl, the most beautiful, the one I always wanted
Who would have thought?

Songs of betrayal address situations in which a woman deserts her man in favor of a rich foreigner, often depicted as Italian. Playfully, Manolín, El Médico de la Salsa plans to torment a lover who has scorned him this way by making constant collect phone calls:

Te di mi amor del alma
Te brindé amor sincero
Pero más pudo el interés
Por todo ese dinero.
Y sé que me dejaste
Y sé que me fallaste
Adiós, que te vaya bien
Good-bye, my love, te quiero

(Chorus)
Te voy a hacer
Una llamada telefónica
A pagar allá

I gave you love from my soul
I gave you sincere love
But greed was stronger because of all that money
I know you left me
I know you failed me
Adios, farewell
Goodbye, my love, I love you

(Chorus)
I'm going to call you
By telephone
Collect!!!

There are boasting songs, which parallel hip-hop, dancehall reggae, and soca in their references to the singer's skill as a musician and a lover. In these two veins respectively El Médico toasts:

Somos lo que hay
Lo que se vende como pan caliente
Lo que prefiere y pide la gente
Lo que se agota en el mercado
Lo que se escucha en todos lados
Somos lo máximo

We are it
What sells like hot bread
What people prefer and request
What sells out in the stores
What's listened to all about
We are the most

and La Charanga Habanera (1996) boasts:

Yo soy cabillero
Tengo mi medida
Fundo la cabilla que tú necesitas

I'm an ironworker
I've got my size
I do the pipe work that you need

More and more songs contain references to Afro-Cuban religious practices and use pieces of ritual chants or make percussive references to ritual rhythms or toques.

According to Adalberto Álvarez the early 1990s "coincided with a time when religious spirituality found a space within the institutional life of the country" (de la Hoz 1997).

In October 1991 Communist Party membership was opened up to revolutionary Christians and other religious believers (Braun 1999: 80). After this "Catholics, Protestants, and Jews return to their churches and synagogues openly, and Santería practitioners no longer hide their rituals" (Behar 2007: 274). In 1992 the Cuban

Constitution was changed to reflect that the state is now “secular” rather than “atheist” (Ibid.). In jest, but accurately, people say that religion was “depenalized” around the same time as the dollar. As a result, “to sing of the orishas became fashionable in popular music, for good and bad,” says Álvarez. On one hand, “one of our cultural roots was being recovered, and, on the other, many imitators appeared on the scene with a pseudo folklore that bothers me” (de la Hoz 1997).

El Tosco and his NG La Banda sang often of los santos. In “Santa Palabra” (holy word), they actually incorporate ritual gestures associated with a lucumí (Yoruba) cleansing ceremony called ebbo, in which negative energy is removed and then thrown backward over one’s shoulders:

Hay muchas personas que esconden los santos
Por el día y por la noche llanto
Para abrir el camino Echu Beleke busca un Eleguá
Pues sin este santo todo va pa tras...
(Chorus)
Despójate, quítate lo malo
Échalo pa tras, límpiate mi hermano

Many people hide the saints
Crying day and night
In order to open the road, Echu Beleke, find an Eleguá
Without that saint nothing goes right
(Chorus)
strip away, get rid of the bad
Throw it backward, clean yourself, my brother

César Pedroso, who is a babalawo in addition to being a composer and pianist, has used batá drums in timba numbers. La Charanga Habanera makes a clear reference to los santos when the timbal performs a rhythmic sequence traditionally played on batá drums for Ochun. The very popular singer and timbera Haila Monpié (former member of Bamboleo) was initiated and wore white, as is custom, during stage performances, and regularly sings to the orishas on her recordings. Many say that when times get tough, religion becomes more important.

Because it developed at the start of the 1990s, as the Soviet Bloc collapsed and the so-called “special period” of rationing and resource management began in Cuba, timba has evolved during a time of intense social change. Timba is one way Cubans have responded musically. Timba is festive and irreverent. The image it portrays is rough and sometimes contrary to authority. For this reason it has been compared to hip-hop, particularly gangsta rap (Acosta 1999). The following performed by Chispa y sus cómplices, at La Casa de la Música, April 2003 talks about the continuing slippage of the Cuban peso in relation to the U.S. dollar:

¡A veinticinco!
¡A veintiséis!
¿Cómo se ha puesto el fula?
¡Duro pero duro de matar!

At twenty five!
Then at twenty-six [pesos to one dollar]!
What’s happened to the greenback?
It’s playing hard to get!

Like rappers, *timberos* defend their music (lyrics and image) as a reflection of reality, what takes place daily in the street (Ibid.). For example, La Charanga Habanera, infamous and even banned by the state in 1997 for their “vulgar” lyrics and stage show, in a number entitled “No estamos locos” (We’re not crazy), sing “Pero, ¿qué loco de qué? si lo que canto es lo que es” (Why am I crazy, if what I sing is what is?).

Controversial texts are common in timba. González and Casanella (2001) assert that timba expresses definite sociological messages through its lyrics and its sound. In terms of lyrics and song structure, the *estribillo*, by its repetitive and catchy nature, is a favorable vehicle to employ double entendre in function of social criticism, to salute los *barrios*, personages, and tourist places of Havana, or to share an anecdote or “*dicharacho*” (slang term) from everyday life. Singer Issac Delgado in an interview with Emir García Meralla in the magazine *Cuban Salsa* says that “an *estribillo* makes or breaks a tune,

there is no in between”, and El Médico adds that, “estribillos speak and summarize popular wisdom...one is obliged to add a touch of *guapería*, of street talk, so that you can feel the authenticity of *afrocubanness*” (emphasis mine—see chapter four on Afro Cuba).

This last comes from an entertainer known as the “king of the estribillos”, the one responsible for many refrains that commanded a place in the day-to-day speech of the people: take for example “hay que estar arriba de la bola” (You’ve got to be on the ball), “preparate pa’ lo que viene” (Get ready for what’s next), “pelo suelto y carretera” (Hair down, open road), “te maté con el detalle” (I killed you with the detail, outwitted you), among many more (Casanella 1998). All of these phrases have an undeniable Afro-Cuban swing, which marks the origin and one primary audience of the style. According to Paulito F.G. “the estribillo is the synthesis of the message that one wants to express...[and] the secret lies in the treatment of the estribillo inside the literary body of the song” (Tabares 1997). For some, like Juan Carlos Alfonso director of Dan Den, too much emphasis on the chorus is also a danger: “People are abusing the chorus a great deal, the majority of the lyrics do not say anything...” (Armenteros 1997).

Casanella, a philologist, discusses the linguistic exchanges between musicians and the public, in which phrases from colloquial slang are taken by musicians and used to popularize compositions (because this is the language of many of their fans), and vice versa. In the latter case musicians invent a phrase—or take it from a small circle of use, which makes it unknown to most—popularize and spread it, inserting it in popular speech momentarily or even permanently. Take for example “tunturuntun” by Adalberto Álvarez, which during 1999 and 2000 was on everyone’s lips and meant “get outta here”, or “no es fácil” (it ain’t easy) which was coined in the 1980s by Juan Formell and to this day is commonly used.

Song texts are also related on many occasions with choreography, as happened with the steps and accompanying gestures of “Masca la cachimba” (chew the pipe) of NG La Banda, “El baile del toca toca” (Do the touch dance) by Adalberto Álvarez, or “Te

pone la cabeza mala” (It drives you crazy) of Los Van Van. “Arriba de la bola” (On the ball) by El Médico had its own dance and coded meaning. Penned during the special period many say that “to be on the ball” meant that one had to hustle, to survive by any means necessary. About the dance that accompanied the song Balbuena writes: “it is characterized by the execution of very sensual, sometimes exotic movements. It is done with arms in the air, bent, hands open, pretending to manipulate a ball or something round [perhaps a globe]. At the same time the hips, waist, and torso are rotated” (Balbuena 2003: 89). Like the texts themselves, the choreographies are submitted to the creative reinterpretation of the public, and thus the cachimba or la bola semiotically and choreographically take on meanings beyond the intention of their authors. A song called “Mi Habana” (My Havana) by Paulito F.G. (discussed later) in which he talks about so-called especulación seems a clear example.

In a kind of intertextuality timba compositions make reference to works from diverse musical traditions, both Cuban and foreign. This practice serves to dinamize the improvisations of the soloists and (when the reference is only musical) specific passages of songs, recontextualizing borrowed “licks” that momentarily evoke the experience and meanings of other works. “¿Qué pasa con ella?” (What’s wrong with her?) on the famous 1997 album *Te Pone La Cabeza Mala* by Juan Formell y Los Van Van, is a good example. When the montuno begins, after the opening argument of the song, most of the improvisations by the lead are bits and pieces of other hits from Los Van Van’s then thirty-year career. In this case they are used to invoke the humor or quality of whichever particular song, and underline the groups staying power over such a long time. “When the singer improvises on the main theme of a song, he or she creates new utterances and also rearticulates and culls phrases from other songs of various traditions. The singer opens up a sonorous space of freedom, improvisation, and innovation, clinging simultaneously to tradition and reaffirming collective memory” (Aparicio 1998: 84).

Timba shares this approach with international salsa and other popular music styles of the African Diaspora.

Timba Dance

Timba as performed by top bands like La Charanga Habanera, Manolito y su Trabuco, and others is characterized by its aggressive sound (Acosta 1999: 12). This refers to driving staccato piano patterns, virtuoso cascades of notes and percussive blasts from the horn sections, funk-ed-out bass lines, and rapped lyrics. Customary meter and tempo changes (both increasing and decreasing) make timba difficult to dance for some. Orozco says that timba relies on tension, that it is at times hard or aggressive in its sound and also in the dance that is its corporal expression, which he describes as “disconnected” or “disjointed”. For Orozco, these movements impede couple dancing in closed partner dance position and favor open pair or group dancing, and the Cuban “rueda de casino” (casino wheel) is lost. He concludes that timba represents “a transgression and subversion of musical, dance, and sociocommunicative values.”

According to Casanella and González, timba dance is a constellation of abrupt movements, dislocated and aggressive, with strong sexual innuendo in which the traditional custom of the couple dance is practically lost (agreeing with Orozco). However, some contend that timba rescued the “casino wheel” dance known as *rueda de casino* among the youth, after a long period of decline, because it inspired new interest in contemporary Cuban popular music (Balbuena 2003; interview with Nieves Armas Rigal 2003).

A few styles of dance are generally used with timba. Some dance traditional Cuban son, emphasizing the “ands” of beats two and four with their shoulders and feet.

Most folks dance casino. Balbuena has done an excellent social history of casino dance, which she calls the most recent development in the progression of *bailes de salon* (ballroom dances) from Cuba, which starts with danzón. She notes that casino was part of the folkloric dance curriculum by Danza Moderna where she studied during the 1970s. Having taken the characteristic formations and open partner position from the various “country dances” of Spain, England, and France, then incorporating the continuous spinning of dancers embraced in closed partner position⁴⁵ from the waltz, a basic step developed that would become the main pattern for Cuban popular dance thereafter (Balbuena 2003: 29). This *paso básico* entails alternating the feet in four musical beats—advancing, retreating, or in place. In the first three beats/counts your foot is fully on the ground and on the fourth it only taps the floor, beginning the process again with the other foot. Cuban son gave casino a special emphasis on rhythm, dancing just so (*con sabor*), *with and also purposefully against* the clave of the music. Son, chachachá, and finally timba would be danced this way.

According to Balbuena, casino developed into its current form over three epochs. During the first epoch, during the 1950s, influences such as stellar musical production, vibrant and plentiful dance spaces, and foreign influence—especially rock n roll (black) dance—established casino as a major form of expression and entertainment among Cubans. She notes that the taste for acrobatic elements and turns, and the common back and forth movement “pa’ ti, pa’ mi” (for you and for me), are derived from rock n roll

⁴⁵ Closed partner dance position consists of two partners—usually male ‘leader’ and female that ‘follows’—where male takes woman’s right hand with his left, forming a near 90 degree angle at the elbow, with both arms bent and held up to shoulder level. The man’s right arm clasps the woman’s back, and she puts her hand on his right shoulder. This position was used in danzón, danzonete, chachachá, son, and lastly timba (Balbuena 2003: 28).

dance from the U.S. (Balbuena 2003: 40). Television, introduced in 1950 to Cuba, also popularized the dance.

In the second epoch, from 1960-1980, casino became even more wildly popular, promoted by state organizations like the Consejo Nacional de Cultura (under whose auspices Conjunto Danza Moderna researched and developed the form), and innovated by individuals and groups—among them cabildo-descended comparsas like Los Guaracheros de Regla (Balbuena 2003: 61). New innovations like “Díle que no” (Tell her no) were added and have become part of standard casino dance vocabulary. In the third stage, from 1981 to the present, inspired by the resurgent popularity of Cuban music, both on the island and abroad, casino gained new popularity after waning in the 1970s. The energy of the timba movement and the fiery dance music of NG La Banda, El Médico, Paulito F.G. and others translated into dance.

In this current era casino has maintained its basic form while adding new elements. Male dancers continue to lead the dance (except when women dance together, one of them leading the other), deciding on the turns and figures executed; while women show their skill by allowing themselves to be led without losing the beat or getting out of step (Balbuena 2003: 72). But whereas before, the majority of the time people danced in closed partner position and let go only to briefly *guarachar* (improvise, groove) then immediately return (Ibid.), dancing nowadays is much more open. It can be danced in closed partner position, in separated partnered couples, in a circle, or in rows. Rafael (an informant we will meet again) had this to say:

I'm at my best when I dance casino! It's my favorite and I've created my own style. I like to add steps from different kinds of dance into casino—mambo, chachachá, rumba, guanguancó, folklore, hip-hop. It's my way of expressing myself, it's a question of spirit (interview 2003).

Other dances added to the casino include the *reparto* (the neighborhood), a kind of vibrating “robot” dance, and the *tembleque* or *pingüe*, a hip-rolling dance similar to those performed by Jamaican “dancehall queens” or Zairean “dancing girls”. The complex of dances, gestures, and physical attitudes surrounding timba reaffirms the genre’s quality of unpredictability; it revitalizes one of the roots of Cuban popular dance (la rueda/the wheel dance) and at the same time approaches dance styles from Africa and its diaspora (such as reggae and soukous for example) because they emphasize community dance (in groups and in couples) but de-emphasize or eliminate closed position partner dancing. According to Rafael:

Repartero is the name for someone who dances to salsa music all by themselves without a partner. [dancing now] You have to pop and drop and move different because you’re dancing alone. It’s a way of heating yourself up.

The dances that accompany timba seem combinations of the steps and gestures that made up the dances for several rhythms of the past—pachanga, bembón, collude, pilón, etc. History, fashion, and popular dance repeat themselves. According to Nieves Armas Rigal, co-author of *Bailes populares tradicionales cubanas*, the dances called the *despelote*⁴⁶ (the mess) and the tembleque (the quake, and a coconut flavor pudding) performed today with timba are no less than the derived product of the above mentioned dances, that besides summarizing and extending the Cuban popular dance tradition through movement and gesture also emphasize the African roots that nourished it

⁴⁶ According to Leymarie, the despelote appeared in the mid 1980s. It first began to develop in 1983 with the song “Sandunguera” by Los Van Van (2002: 170). “During montuno sections of the dance, women perform vigorous, sexually suggestive movements of the waist and hips.” Hugo “Mundele” Morejón, trombonist for the group, agrees (interview 2003). Hip-hop *crumpin’* (featured in the documentary film *Rize* by David LaChapelle) and the *dutty whine* craze in dancehall reggae exemplify a similar spirit of eroticism and aggression in the context of recent popular dances of the African Diaspora.

(interview with Nieves Armas Rigal 2003)⁴⁷. This jives with anthropologist and dancer Pearl Primus' assertion that "the spirit...responsible for the dynamic [African] dances of yesterday is merely underground...sometimes it will spring forth in a seemingly new form" (De Frantz 2002: 121). About this César "Pupy" Pedroso says, "our idiosyncrasy as Cubans is very African, we are descendants of the Africans, all these dances that have come and gone, what we call timba today, the *despelote*, all of it, is nothing more than African dance"⁴⁸ (interview with César "Pupy" Pedroso 2003)". Hip hop *crumpin'* (featured in the documentary film *Rize* by David LaChapelle) and the *dutty whine* craze in dancehall reggae exemplify a similar spirit of eroticism, aggression, and "African revival" in different genres of popular music/dance from the Black Atlantic.

Like other forms of popular dance music, the movements represent "the fundamental connection between the pleasures of the sound and their social realization in the libidinal movement of bodies, styles, and sensual forms". The dance, then, is "a social encounter, which can be [in] a dancehall, a club, or a party, where bodies are

⁴⁷ In 2000 during carnival festivities in Matanzas, a city known as an important center of Afrocuban culture, I observed a salsa/timba band perform an *oro cantado* to the principal Yoruba orishas (mixing Yoruba and Spanish this means "tradition sung", an ordered series of songs and chants in acknowledgment and praise of the various Yoruba deities still venerated in Cuba). During this performance the soloist asked that children or initiates of each orisha join him on stage to dance the steps traditionally associated with them, performed now however to the timba beat. The dancers always began with traditional, Afrocuban religious movements, and as the music intensified their style changed, evolving quickly into timba, with its own strong African energy. This illustrates well the sacred-profane, ancient-modern continuum spanned by Cuban popular music, this time incarnated as timba. Various authors in Sloat's edited volume *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk* trace specific connections between Congolese and Caribbean dance. For example, Crowell explains the continuity between Congolese dance, Cuban rumba, and Puerto Rican salsa (Sloat 2002: 11-14).

⁴⁸ In the Cuban context the term 'African' refers to manifestations of black culture "informed by ancient African organizing principles" that crossed the Atlantic from the Old World to the New (Thompson 1984: xiii). Sometimes these cultural patterns are identifiable as derived from specific ethnic groups (Bastide 1971: 8) or sometimes only recognizable as a general 'Negro type' [read Afrocuban] (Ibid.: 10) which is the result of transculturation among original African ethnic groups, Europeans, and Asians on Cuba (Ortiz 1995). In both cases creation is based largely on a common "understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception" (Mbiti 1969: 2) shared by the various African ethnic groups introduced on the island and used by them to adapt to new circumstances (Brandon 1997; Herskovits 1990; Ortiz 1951).

permitted to respond to physical rhythms that elsewhere would not be tolerated; the moment when romanticism brushes against reality, and a transitory step out of the everyday can be enjoyed” (Chambers 1986: 135). Timba dance implies “a going out of one’s self, the creation of alternative space, a state of mind that may function as therapeutic or political liberation” (Aparicio 1998: 103).

The dance reflects popular culture by mimicking the lyrics to songs like NG’s “Masca la cachimba” (Suck on the pipe) or Manolín’s “La bola” (the ball)—to name just two (Balbuena 2003). Dance also responds to broader political events and their local consequences, as seen in rueda steps that describe, with motion/distance between partners, Cuba’s sudden isolation during the special period (Leymarie 2002: 254). The maroon is present here too in dance, as timba dance draws upon, “the rumba, drumming, and the merengue [that] were prohibited in the colonial [and post colonial] societies of the Caribbean” (Aparicio 1998: 103) including Cuba.

Context

Timba is a recent development of Afrocuban popular dance music. Timba’s association with Afrocuban culture (see chapter four) and with shifts in the Cuban economy and social life (see chapter five) plays an important role in perceptions of it as rebellious music. The genre was closely linked to the promotion of tourism in Cuba and was aided by legislation that sought to engage Cuba, at least partly, in the world capitalist economy. Take for example, Paulito F.G.’s song “¿Dónde están los especuladores?” (Where are the speculators?) from 1997 (perhaps the height of the timba boom), irresistible dance music with a striking message. In contemporary slang “especulador” (literally speculator) means a ‘show off’ eager to accumulate, enjoy, and flaunt wealth, a polemical identity in a socialist nation. The word echoes and puns on the older use of speculator referring to those who, at the start of the Revolution, were too slow in

embracing necessary sacrifices (i.e. surrendering businesses, properties, etc.). Whereas leaders exhort musicians to “think about their society and its values and to write pieces that reflect such [socialist] values” (Moore 2006: 24), works that depart from this mission or seem to question it become problematic. In the words of José Quiroga, “this is where the vanguard of expression collides with the vanguard that wants to preserve tradition” (Quiroga 2005: 147). He continues:

The liberating force is music, but the beat of the music is never allowed to stray from the beat of the state. Music and the state seem to dance around each other, and with each other: music involves musicians and dancers, and these demand venues, and the venues produce a collective expression that may or may not fall into line with what government policies seek to promote (Ibid.).

It seems that some, especially the ones that criticize timba, imagine that it has nothing to do with authentic Cuban music, that of yesteryear, or other contemporary forms of better taste. We have seen that what is considered proper music is highly contested and shifting terrain. Acosta calls timba “the most important phenomenon of the 1990s and the first [Cuban] music of international popularity and importance since the 1950s” (Acosta 1998). He corroborates what other writers say, noting the fierce passages from horn sections, elaborate arrangements, rhythmic patterns from rumba and Santería, hip-hop style vocals in a context of call and response, disorienting tempo changes, the spontaneous nature of timba music and dance, the use of street language with a festive and irreverent character, lyrics considered vulgar, violent, sexist and “ghetto”. But even more interesting, he asserts that timba is heir to a long musico-social tradition, in which Afrocuban forms debut faced by very strong opposition nourished by racial prejudice and the desire that Cuba (and therefore the music that represents Cuba) not be black.

According to Casanella and González, in José Luis Cortés, director of NG La Banda, “flow the deepest inheritance of Cuban son, the footprint of funk, Caribbean music, flamenco and rumba, specific reference to hip-hop/rap and the clearest jazz influence, as well as a solid formation and systematic understanding of the codes of classical music”, and the work of the orchestra is a “real fusion of songo, rumba, afro and jam session in function of dance”.

NG La Banda

NG The Band was born in 1988 for the purpose of breaking obsolete molds and breaking new ground in the field of popular dance music. Through the creativity of its director and the talented daredevil musicians that accompanied him, the group unified the classical and the popular, traditional and contemporary, at the service of the dancer. NG is known for the virtuosity of its arrangements and the confidence with which they move (very often in one piece) between musical reference points, citing son, funk, Caribbean musics including soca, merengue, and reggae and exhibiting a clear command of the language of jazz.

During the early 1990s the orchestra enjoyed tremendous popularity, daring to call itself “la banda que manda” (the band that rules), and with good reason. Many of NG’s successes of that period marked true revolutions in how Cuban dance bands would make music. For example, their hits “La Bruja” (The Witch) and “La Expresividad” (Expressiveness) by Cortés show the complexity of composition and arrangement (especially in the first piece), the hard sound that would earn for their music (and that of the timba movement they initiated) the denomination of “heavy salsa” or the “heavy metal de la salsa”, and a strong use of the colloquial extremes of Cuban slang, a fact which earned them from the start harsh criticism from the academic world and various defenders of “good taste”, among them religious zealots. The very personality of Cortés is offensive to many, although his talent and mastery as an artist cannot be denied. They

say that he is a “pesao”, a clown, a monkey, a thug, “I can’t stand him...but he is good”. A great deal of what is said of NG, its music, and the personality of its director echoes the criticism that has faced popular dance music and all types of expression emitted clearly *del pueblo* in Cuba, and many countries.

In the past and in another artistic genre, Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén, was criticized for his work *Motivos de son* based on black rhythms. Intellectuals like Ramon Vasconcelos asked why he spent his vast creativity on such a thing, and to them Guillén attributed a tendency to think with “imported heads”, despising their own culture and seeking to be European (Guillén 2002: 16-18). According to Carolyn Cooper, the same thing happens today in Jamaica where dancehall reggae is criticized for its frequent, lewd sexual references, descriptions of violence, promotion of deplorable values⁴⁹ and its use of the lingua franca of the country, patois—for some backward and embarrassing. Not to mention the case of hip-hop which many accuse of being little more than noise.

For this reason in her book *Black Noise* Patricia Rose affirms that the genre was born from the margins of American society, the poor black and Latin districts of New York, utilizing forms of expression through sound and wordplay that shocked many because they did not understand and did not want to (Rose 1998). And so on throughout the Americas. It is well documented that what is happening at present with timba happened in Cuba with previous manifestations of popular dance music on the island, specifically the guaracha, danzón and son (see Acosta, Carpenter, Casanella and González, Feijoó, León, Moore). Perceptions of El Tosco and timba should be of no

⁴⁹ Carolyn Cooper is the founder of the Institute of Reggae Studies at the University of the West Indies (Mona, Jamaica). She affirms that reggae has always been criticized for its roots among the humblest elements of Jamaican society, principally denigrated by Jamaicans who identify themselves as upper class. There is much controversy now about the just place that patois, or jamaica talk, (often associated with slavery, the countryside, and the poor) in the cultural life of the country, especially since Haiti has claimed Creole as its official language, recognizing that this is the true language of Haiti, not French. Many like Cooper believe that Jamaica should follow suit or at least acknowledge this genuine form of Jamaican speech. This debate relates to the controversy about vulgar timba lyrics, uncouth expressions, bad taste, etc.

surprise. Connections between timba and other musical forms from the African Diaspora make sense as well.

Timba shares many characteristics with other forms of popular music from the African Diaspora. Argeliers León, the dean of Cuban musicology, writes: “people appropriate those elements that have some similarity or proximity with what they already have, they search for a kind of link by analogy” (León 1984). Jazz, hip-hop, reggae and samba are all subaltern forms (in some moments of their history or in some aspect of their present projection), forms that, like timba, are bold and by some dreaded. This untamed, “maroon” identity links timba with other Diaspora music forms.

Like Trinidadian soca it can be evasively political, using double entendre and coded language to veil social commentary. It is also an important vehicle for masses of people to find ecstasy through dance (Moonsammy). Like Congolese rumba, or soukous, it draws on a history of musical syncretization, and oral traditions in the form of old and new folk wisdom (Stewart 2000). It speaks for “the common man”, incorporates influences from religious music, carnival traditions and folklore, and employs modern instruments (synthesizers, drum machines, etc.) and Western harmony. Like Jamaican dancehall it gives free reign to ways of expression considered vulgar and improper for reasons that touch race, class, gender, and national identity (Cooper 2004, Stolzoff 2000, Hope 2006). Opposition to dominant ideology and determination to “tell it like it is, no matter what” is part of timba and part of the scene—an attitude demonstrated through gesture, dance, and dress, as well as lyrics.

Also, these international, intercultural, and intergenre exchanges are part of a process of transculturation in which the presence of Latin American culture is increasing and has resulted in more references to Latino culture through Spanish melodies, lyrics, choreography and dancers in music videos, etc. (See songs of Puff Daddy, Fat Joe, Eve,

Wycleff Jean and Beanie Man among others)⁵⁰. The reggaetón craze, which has swept many parts of the world including the U.S. and Spanish Caribbean, is part of this tendency, and is criticized by many for being too “pop”, too commercial. Like these forms timba runs the risk (perhaps inevitable) of losing some of its power through commercialization and resultant creative stagnation.

Two periods or attitudes can be perceived in the timba production of the 1990s: one spontaneous, visceral, impassioned, of music in frank dialogue with the Cuban experience; and another in which the music is commodified for the international record market⁵¹. Copying the best of the timba produced in the first period led to the homogenization of the music, a dizzying number of new bands⁵² (mostly fragments

⁵⁰ Music producer, fashion designer, and rapper Sean Combs—also known as Puff Daddy or P Diddy—notorious as a businessman and also for having been paramour to Newyorican entertainer Jennifer López, often adds bits and pieces of Spanish into his songs, in recognition of a Latin audience and the interest their culture holds for various markets both national and internationally. Rapper Missy Elliot does the same, though more vulgarly, when she sings about her *chocha* (pussy) in the 2000 smash hit “Work it”. Another rapper, Eve, has a song, “Who’s that Girl?” (2000) that features a rap-mambo-chachachá rhythm with a music video in which she Latin dances in a salon ballroom. The Haitian born Wyclef Jean and Beeniemann from Jamaica are eclectic Caribbean artists who created a rendition of “La Guantanamera” by the Cuban, Joseíto Fernández. Kofi Olomide, famous Congolese soukous singer, includes raps performed in Spanish on his disc *Attentat* (2000), with messages to friends in Centro Habana. The singing duo Les Nubians, based in Paris, and who sing mostly in French and English have included on their second album songs in Spanish and even inflected with Cuba’s unique slang. Renowned Jamaican reggae dancehall artist Buju Banton has collaborated with Tego Calderón, pioneering reggaetón artist from Puerto Rico. These are a few examples that represent a definite tendency in popular music in various non-Spanish-language markets to include Spanish, Latin culture, and even *lo cubano*. (See Rivera 2003 on Latino influence on hip-hop music and culture.)

⁵¹ It has been noted that the approach of some bands like Charanga Habanera was always pop inspired (Perna 2005); however, they were original, avante garde even, rather than recycled. The workings of the international market pressure musicians into playing music with the greatest international appeal—even though it may not be very successful in Cuba—such as traditional genres in the style of the 1950s, or else to turn their back on what is specifically Cuban and play instead a type of commercialized salsa which has become the standard in U.S. and Latin American markets since the mid 1980s (Roy 2002: 196).

⁵² Many of the leading groups of the early 1990s have since broken up, since the necessity of going on tour prevailed over musical convictions, more so for instrumentalists than bandleaders (Roy 2002: 196). Many popular singers leave groups to found new ones in which they are the featured voice and leader. Issac Delgado left NG La Banda, Haila Mompié separated from Bamboleo and then later from Azucar Negra, Tirso Duarte left Pupy y los que son son, Aramis Galindo left Adalberto y su Son, etc. As the musicians move, many of them seek economic compensation as much as or more than artistic freedom. The high number of talented young musicians in Cuba makes it easy to pay them at low rates as they establish themselves. Popular bandleaders and star singers like Juan Formell, Adalberto, Paulito F.G., and Haila are, therefore, in a much stronger financial position than other timba musicians. Low pay and the desire to tour and reach power positions accounts for the “shuffle” as many bands form and reform endlessly.

broken off from established projects), and audience burnout. Some artists abandoned the timba sound for the smoother, more reserved sound associated with the international salsa of New York and Latin America. Of these two moments, the first⁵³ best exemplifies the maroon spirit due to its sincerity and power. Most anthemic timba songs date from this golden era that lasted between approximately 1993 (a year marked by the opening of El Palacio de la Salsa and the legalization of the U.S. dollar) and 2001 (when El Médico defected to Miami).

“The wild dear is no house pet”

In an article entitled “José Luis Cortés: Between el Barrio and Beethoven” by Jaime Sarusky (1999), the topic of people’s perceptions of this musician comes up:

- JS Would you say that it is NG or your own personality that has been criticized?

- JLC Musically it would be difficult to criticize NG. Like so many things, it has a great deal to do with hidden racism, with our different economic situation, with envy harbored by many right now.

Subsequently, in answer to another question, Cortés explains how some see him “as a flashy, eccentric, self absorbed person” because NG never had musical competition and was very successful artistically and economically. “[People would always say] ‘these guys come out of nowhere, succeed in the street and in the theater, do jazz, do rock, do classical music, go to the best places in Europe, the United States, and then this black guy

⁵³ I compare this music with “old salsa”, “classic salsa”, “salsa añeja”—all names referring to the salsa music of the 1970s in New York and the Caribbean (but not Cuba), a golden age in which a new form evolved, with an innovative sound and real social engagement—considered to be of higher quality than than the salsa moderna/romántica/erótica/monga that became popular in the 1980s and seems still the dominant face of the genre, with less emphasis on percussion, soneo (the improvisation of verses by a soloist), and musical virtuosity. See the work of César Miguel Rondón and Ángel Quintero for perspectives on these eras. Interesting also is Elmer González’ article “Salsa vieja o salsa nueva: en color está en la clave” which reminds us that our opinions and preferences have much to do with the course of our lives; we believe the music of our youth (arguably the best times in our lives) is the best, a golden age. Even so, I am convinced that salsa clásica and timba brava exist; timba brava being the highest quality timba, that which sought new sounds and close identification with the everyday life of the Cubans.

shows up with a tank top jersey on' and they wanted to see me with a briefcase and suit, but that is not my image. I am a black man from the neighborhood, el barrio. I was born in El Condado and this is still very deeply rooted within me.”

Here he asserts the validity of his own will; the fact that he should not necessarily follow the dictates of a society dominated by folks in many ways unlike him, within Cuba. Later in the interview:

-JS Let's return to your image, since just as you wear a tank top jersey you also know how to wear a suit.

-JLC I have a few.

-JS But it is not only having them but knowing how to use them.

-JLC I am responding metaphorically to your question.

-JS Well then, as a musician, as an artist that must project himself to the public, do you project that image to a certain sector of the public with which you especially want to communicate?

-JLC I think that I would enjoy playing with the symphony orchestra dressed in jeans and a T-shirt with my cap turned to the back, and I'd like to perform in the neighborhood in a suit and tie, because it is what you respect more.

The first shall be last and the last first. In this interview we note a confidence/defiance based on his tremendous capacity as an artist and his decision to be himself despite the expectations and desires of others, a characteristic that links him to the maroon, also respected and hated. Cortés shows his refusal to be dominated or trapped, in this case by the questions of his interviewer, and his capacity to confound with his intelligence and, metaphorically, to escape. All familiar with him know that he dresses with great charisma and a unique flavor—whether or not you believe his red suits, wide-brim hats, alligator skin boots, etc. are really elegant. It is fascinating that he would dress casually for the people of high society (for him aliens) and formally for the people of the neighborhood, his “pueblo yoruba” (Yoruba people) as he often calls them.

He enjoys breaking rules and “crashing” closed social spaces, bringing with him styles and behaviors alien to specific contexts. We know that his music is multidimensional and aims to reach diverse audiences with different tastes; nevertheless he establishes here a special focus for his creativity, and it is el barrio, the marginal world, to which he orients himself and pays highest respect. He exalts “the school of the street”, placing it on par with the academy, recognizing the value of popular knowledge and creativity (Roy 2002: 180).

Seeking antecedents of timba and its image, and indicating contradictory perceptions it is interesting to consider that the personal and artistic projection of José Luis Cortés are similar in various ways to that of Benny Moré—who although he has no comparison is an important marker in the history of Cuban (and Caribbean) music and society for the boundaries of race and class that he crossed. Both under discriminatory and adverse conditions (although different) were determined to show their ability, to shine their inner light out into the world and, once their greatness was recognized (though not without criticism), show an irreverent attitude in their self presentation—speech, dress, gestures, etc. What is irreverence but self-affirmation against the grain of accepted societal rules? Those who have fought a great deal to succeed, at times offending with the intrusion of their presence (like Benny creating a jazz band of blacks and mulatos that he called his “tribe”, when normally these bands were comprised of blanquitos), when their time comes to shine they express the pain and frustration they experienced as eccentricity. (Take for example African American jazz guru Miles Davis.)

“After reaching the height of popularity, Benny wanted to continue living as he had before becoming a legend. That was the origin of all the clashes with those who tried to change him. It is nearly impossible to impose unnatural rules on a man accustomed to living free, and so Miguel Matamoros said of Benny ‘Muchachos, leave Benny alone, the dear is no house pet’” (Faget 1999). This recalls Cortés’ affirmations of himself as “a black man from the hood” and that fame would not change him. Although the two

musicians are considered “escapa’o” or “fuga’o” (colloquial words that express great skill in a specific activity, in this case music, and at the same time evoke the maroon, literally meaning escaped or fled) they do not enjoy equal popular acceptance, perhaps for several reasons. Undoubtedly Benny Moré is one of the most important musicians of Latin America and one of the most representative figures of Cuban culture, in the words of Leonardo Acosta a “figure of synthesis”⁵⁴ of Cuban music, the creator of an opus that is timeless. Keeping this fact in mind and that Cortés has also marked the history of Cuban music, it is the element of time that helps Benny to be more easily digested, the truth being that both have been considered “niggers that don’t know their place” (Ibid.: 30). The historical (i.e. absent) maroon is preferred over the present day rebel for the danger that the latter represents. Carolyn Cooper, in her book *Sound Clash* about dancehall reggae in Jamaica, argues that the work of new artists who critique life on the island is often despised or ignored while Bob Marley is held up as the only true and timeless voice of reggae music partly in order to silence them⁵⁵.

An anecdote I heard told about José Luis Cortés recounts an instance of his “provocative nose thumbing” (Roy 2002: 199) at polite society and the powers that be. On a television program interview he was asked just why he represents Cuban music in such a vulgar, offensive fashion; and instead of responding he changes the subject, offering to play a piece of classical music for flute supposedly known by all “cultured” people. The host assures him that she is familiar with the work. Cortés proceeds to play a masterpiece of colors and arpeggios and afterward asks if the famous piece was well

⁵⁴ These figures create art that is not centered in the reinterpretation of some form, but is rather the gelling of various influences and tendencies, and for this reason they are unique, singular cases. Neither is it possible to consider perpetuating their style, because their accomplishment implies rupture, climax and end, theirs is a paradigm that invalidates continuation and demands search in new creative directions, not better or worse, but certainly different (Orejuela 1999 citing Leonardo Acosta in *Benny Moré*. 1985. Perfil Libre de Amin Nasser. UNEAC. La Habana.).

⁵⁵ One such new artist Anthony B explains: “Bob naa hurt them no more...[my music] and Bob Marley music. Is the same music, is just dat Bob Marley can’t hurt them no more. Bob can’t say nothing new. Bob can’t see [what’s going on] now an [say] wa im woulda like fi seh. But I am here, who can seh it (Cooper 2004: 19).

done. The interviewer says yes, and at that Cortés declares that what he just played was no famous composition at all, but rather his own virtuoso improvisation, which embarrassed the host and surely many that share her perspective. The maroon escaped. But not before landing a painful blow. *¡Qué peligro!* What danger! As in the words of Cuban scholar Antonio Benítez-Rojo about the marginalized Caribbean identity in general, El Tosco is “a consummate performer with recourse to the most daring improvisations to keep from being trapped” (1996: 24).

Timba was born as a maroon music in the face of challenges posed by a radically changing Cuban society in crisis throughout the decade of the 1990s, in which it has been necessary for certain Cubans—blacks and mulatos especially—to reaffirm their identity, presence and importance in their own terms inside the culture and social structure of Cuba. In terms of maroon aesthetics timba employs the strategies of “raiding”—borrowing elements from diverse musical sources—and “improvisation”—creating new musical language and style for emergent social circumstances, according to old performance principles. Like maroons of the colonial period timberos are in relationship with national/colonial governments and/or international markets, negotiating power and opportunity from a marginalized position.

The penetration of marginal Afro-Cuban culture in mainstream Cuban culture in the form of aggressive sounds, marginal themes, vulgar, coded lyrics, and eccentric or “ghetto” self representations are but affirmations of identity that intend not to destroy Cuban society but rather to find a just position within it, as has always been the case in the fight of blacks and mulatos in Cuba (Fernández 1994). So it is that timba and the reaction of Cubans toward it (and similar movements) are quite significant, complex and impassioned. Timba will have many repercussions musically and in the history of Cuba and its beautiful Revolution.

But how can we describe the social environment that saw the birth of timba? How can we examine the performance of individuals and communities constructing

identity to the timba beat? How can we pin down the relation between the music and the constellation of important extra musical social phenomena that influence it? African heritage impregnates all of Cuban culture and is one of the matrices that sustain popular music—knowledge that has been transmitted, sustained, and transformed across generations since the period of slavery (Roy 2002: 11). The next chapter describes the black experience in Cuba as a backdrop to the development of timba. By exploring the notion of Afro Cuba we better understand how timba was born and its meaning as maroon music in the context of Cuban culture and dance music.

Chapter 4

Afro Cuba



Fig. 4.0 Con Martí/With Martí

Chapter 4

Afro Cuba

“Afrocuban⁵⁶ is used in a way similar to black in the U.S. context: inclusive of both ‘negro’ (black) and ‘mulato’ (mulatto, or brown), in contrast to ‘Euro-’ or ‘Hispano-Cuban.’”

—Sarduy and Stubbs (2000: xi)

“The African contribution to Cuban culture, whose genesis was in the sugar mill, possessed a strong dose of rebellion against the oppressive atmosphere. All culture that the Afrocuban projects is defensive [self-defense].”

—Miguel Barnet (1981: 249)

This chapter considers the notion of “Afro Cuba” and the cultural processes that created and continue to shape it. By exploring various perspectives within the relevant literature, and through the personal experiences of Afrocuban people, we will show how characteristics such as a West-African cosmovision, extreme creativity (especially in the areas of music and dance), low social status, and patriotism developed among Afrocubans according to their historical experience in Cuba. In section one, by looking at different sites important in the formation of Afrocuban culture throughout Cuban history—focusing on cabildos⁵⁷, selected political organizations, Afrocuban societies and clubs, and periodicals—I make the case that in contemporary Cuba the public dance has taken

⁵⁶ First used in 1847 by Antonio de Veitia. Later it was popularized in the writings of Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz (Ortiz in Sarduy and Stubbs 1993: 28).

⁵⁷ Mutual aid societies.

on many of their functions. Dance spaces are extensions of old organizational traditions and avenues for the continued development of Afro-Cuban culture and discourse. Timba, as discussed in chapter two, voices the concerns of Afro-Cubans in the immediate context of the 1990s, and echoes the aspirations of Afro-Cubans throughout Cuban history. Just as these organizations and publications were important Afro-Cuban spaces so are the public dances where timba is played—singing and dancing identity from the particular social position of Afro-Cubans. Section two discusses the relationship of blacks to the Revolution under Fidel Castro. Information from interviews conducted with white and black Cubans is framed in terms of Mark Sawyer’s “inclusionary discrimination” and “race cycles theory” to give a picture of the social circumstances under which timba developed as an Afro-Cuban cultural expression. Section three examines the text of a song by Mario ‘Mayito’ Rivera that speaks to the past, present, and future of Afro-Cuba.

Africans came to Cuba starting perhaps as early as Columbus’ first journey, and were an important cultural factor on the Island by the 17th century, even before the massive slave importations that would make Cuba, for a long time, *the* world super power of sugar (Barnet 1981: 183). For this reason, the plight of black Cuba does not concern Afro-Cubans alone. Cuba and Afro-Cuba have been part of each other from the start. Mandingo, Mina, Ashanti, Madagascar, and many ethnic groups arrived in Cuba. However, factors—including sheer numbers, time of arrival, and particular characteristics of the various groups—saw Yoruba, Arará, Congo, and Carabalí/Abakuá cultures⁵⁸ remain most clearly discernible. For example, Yoruba arrived in large numbers from the 1820s to the end of slavery in 1886, and brought with them a religious system that was compatible in many ways (with its saint-like orishas) with the slave master’s Catholicism.

⁵⁸ The Yoruba cultural area covered Nigeria and the east of Benin, as far as the kingdom of Ketu. The Arará were from the kingdom of Allada, in the south of Dahomey, near the slaving port of Ouidah. The Bantu (Congo in Cuba) inhabited the south of Cameroon, Gabon, the Congo (formerly Congo-Brazzaville), Burundi, Rwanda, Congo-Zaire, and Angola, as far as the north of Namibia. Calabar (source of Carabalí culture in Cuba) stretched between Nigeria and Cameroon, from the coast to Lake Chad (Roy 2002: 12, see also Brandon 1997).

The Yoruba (and other African) traditions in the island have served as an important element of cohesion, strength, identification and pride, and have also become a theoretical and philosophical base for the Cuban colored population in their resistance against slavery and then in their later struggle against racism (Martínez 2007: 42). From diverse origins, the various elements of Cuba's black population evolved together a cohesive Afro-Cuban tradition that permeated not only the artistic and intellectual spheres of Cuban life but also the social and religious aspects (Moore 1988: 102). They came together first⁵⁹ on the slave ships, and successively in the barracoons, bateyes, cabildos, and later in the solares of Cuba (Barnet 1981: 243)⁶⁰.

In each of these contexts distinct African ethnicities and identities mixed with poor Hispanic and even Asian elements to create *lo afrocubano*⁶¹. According to Sarduy, the term "Afro-Cuban" is used in a way similar to black in the U.S. context: inclusive of both 'negro' (black) and 'mulato' (mulatto, or brown), in contrast to 'Euro-' or 'Hispano-Cuban'. Afro-Cuban is the *academic* term, popularized by Ortiz, which refers to dark blacks and a whole range of mixture between negro and blanco (white). Some refuse to use the term afrocubano "because in actuality the entire Cuban population and the Cuban culture are indeed Afro-Hispanic" (Martínez 2007: 11). The terms "negro" and "mulato" have often been diluted into general categories like "race of color" or "colored class", thus avoiding the narrowness of words like negro, moreno, and pardo⁶². Afro-Cuban is synonymous, then, with "colored" in the sense this term was used in the United States to refer to African descended people of various shades. "These constructions...underline the

⁵⁹ Many Africans came from regions where various ethnic groups had been in contact and cultural exchange for centuries (see George Brandon 1997).

⁶⁰ Barracoons were holding cells from which slaves were sold, and also refer to housing for blacks on plantations both during and after slavery. Bateyes refers to the sugar mill grounds. Cabildos are mutual aid societies for Africans brought to Cuba. (See Ortiz 1996: 106; Barnet and Montejo 1994: 23, 61.)

⁶¹"The creolization process has affected all groupings to such a degree that it is difficult to talk of any form of racial purity, whether in physiological or socio-cultural terms. Nonetheless...strong racial differences...must be recognized and respected as such...(Sarduy and Stubbs 1993: 14)."

⁶²Each of these refers to a black person.

common experience of subordination and discrimination suffered by all Afro Cubans” (de la Fuente 2001: 31). Nancy Morejón (2003) emphasizes that “the Afro Cuban essence” exists. As a term, however, though it is not offensive, *afrocubano* is almost never used by nonacademic Cubans (white or black). The terms *negro*, *moreno*, *niche*, or *chardo* have basically the same meaning—Afro Cuban, black—and are heard much more often as self-identification among Cubans of color.

Let us consider Cuban racial terminology and thought to better understand Afro Cuba as related to Cuba’s social hierarchy.

Shades of Race in Cuba

As in many other places in the world, there are many comely, dark chocolate to blue-black Africans in Cuba. *Negro fino* (refined), *negro bonito* (good looking), and *negro serio* (serious) are a few positive designations that acknowledge their clear African heritage and honor with respect the contributions of black Cubans like Antonio Maceo, Juan Gualberto Gómez, and Evaristo Estenoz to Cuban history. When *negro fosforescente* (coal black), *negro bembón* (big lipped black), *negro fula* (brother up to no good), *negro verde* (angry), *mono* (monkey), or *negro palmao* (broke black man) are used, negativity is being expressed in terms of undesirable, “ugly” African features, stereotypically black (mis)behavior, and social and economic underdevelopment.

There are also categories that fall in between and augment the main ones. For example, very dark-skinned people with fine facial features (slim noses, pursed lips) and good (read straight) hair are called *moros*, after the Moors who are present in Cuba’s Spanish heritage. Some contend that Spain learned its color-based (rather than blood-based as in the Anglophone world) racial ideology from the Arabs (Moore 2007: 103-106). Sometimes in order to flatter someone, utilizing the subtle language of race, you might refer to them as *moro* when more accurately they should be described as *negro*. For example, one evening a gentleman approached me to sell several pairs of eyeglasses

in very poor condition; in order to butter me up for this hard sell, he immediately began calling me *moro*. On another occasion I was being summoned by someone and did not realize they were talking to me because they kept calling me, “hey you, *mulato!*” *Mulato* or *mulata* is a vague term that refers to a mixture between black and white, giving the offspring the best of both worlds, passion and soul, *pelo bueno* (good hair) and fine features. Fair-skinned *mulatos* are called *mulato claro* (light), *mulato blanconazo* (big white *mulato*), or *adelantao* (advanced/evolved) while the darker-skinned can be called *mulato oscuro* or *mulato con trova* (with soul, a little more of Africa). In the black/white continuum, the *mulato* or *mulata* are not simply median, but are said to be *la combinación perfecta*, with a mystique of sensuality and beauty that is evoked to represent Cuba itself. Cuba is known by many *por sus habanos y sus mulatas* (for its cigars and its women). There are ladies in La Habana drinking *Mulata* brand rum as they speak of this or that *tremendo mulato* (hunk/*tenda*). The main character in one of Cuba’s most significant works of literature from the nineteenth century, Cirilo Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés*, is a beautiful *mulata*.

Mulatas and *mulatos* are said to be good for sex. This is part of a logic that portrays and embodies black male sexuality through the image of the black beast, incapable of love and tenderness but being a crude rapist of white women. A similar image was attached to Black and *Mulatto* women, both supposedly wanting only vicious sex (Martínez 2007: 90). Kutzinski notes how the sexual and racial stereotype of the *mulata* has “intricate and contradictory ties to the ideological construction of that imagined community called Cuba”. For her Cuba encodes its identity in the iconic figure of the *mulata*—that of the Virgin of Charity who is Cuba’s patron saint—not to mention in the countless images of *mulatas* that have been circulated in the island’s literature and popular culture roughly for the past two centuries.



Fig. 4.1 Quien no tiene de congo...

Literally the phrase means, 'who doesn't have congo [African] blood, has carabali [African] blood'; all Cubans share African genetic and cultural heritage according to this view.

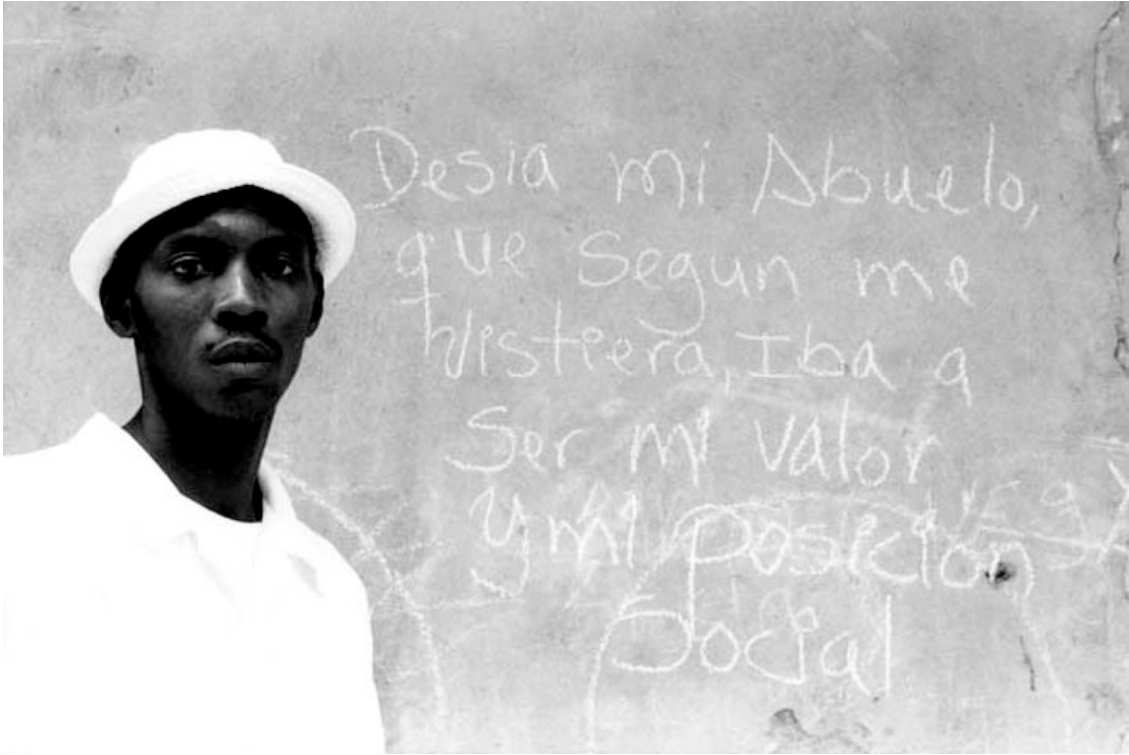


Fig. 4.2 Desia mi abuelo/My grandfather used to say



Fig. 4.3 ¿Cuál?/Which?

In fact, by the early twentieth century, terms such as *cubanidad* and *cubanía* (which designate different versions of, or approaches to cubanness) were, for all intents and purposes, synonymous to *mestizaje*. Most saliently contradictory about such discursive entanglements is the symbolic privileging of a socially underprivileged group defined by its mixed race or phenotype, its gender, and its imputed licentious sexuality. In the case of the *mulata*, high symbolic or cultural visibility contrasts sharply with social invisibility...there is no place for the *mulata* in the culture and the society that so consistently represents itself through her (Kutzinski 1993: 7).

In the U.S. the term “mulatto” is not frequently used, because all African Americans are considered black no matter the relative lightness or darkness of their skin. In Cuba however, it is necessary to scratch through several layers of identity before all can agree that *negros*, *moros*, and *mulatos* are “all black”.

Jabao is another category. A kind of median, like the *mulato*, however stripped of the idyllic qualities of sensuality and beauty. *Jabaos* usually have fair skin with kinky hair and clear African facial features (wide noses, thick lips, etc.). Some have reddish or even blond hair and are said to be *la candela* (fire), extremely mischievous and picaresque. It is said that *los jabaos no tienen raza* (*jabaos* have no race) and that they do not mix well (genetically) with other races. *Los jabaos son malos* (*jabaos* are bad) is another often heard phrase.

In the *barrios* of Havana you will inevitably find someone who responds immediately to the nickname *chino* or *china*. The Chinese who started entering Cuba in 1847 as indentured servants to augment slave labor established long lasting communities and left their genetic legacy. During the slavery era Chinese men reproduced with free black women and *mulatas* because steps were taken to keep the Chinese laborers and the slaves separate (Pérez de la Riva 2000: 79). Besides sugar, in urban areas the Chinese worked as rapid transporters, in construction and cigar rolling, on the docks and railroads,

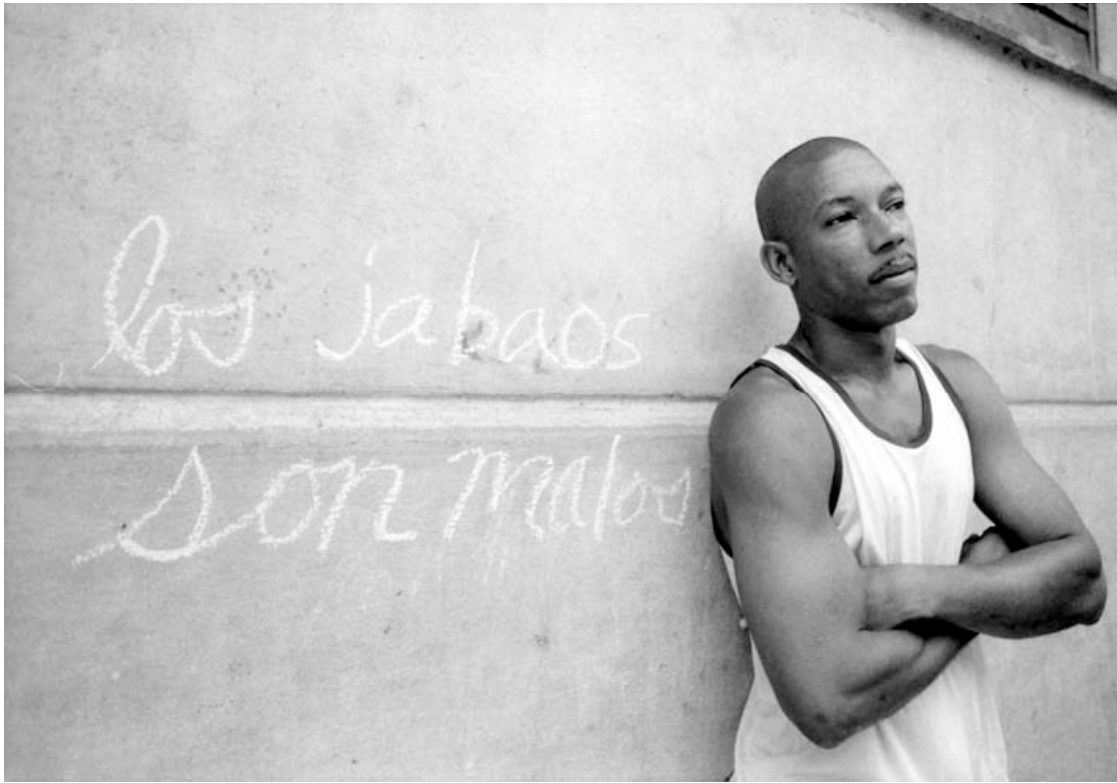


Fig. 4.4 Los jabaos son malos/Jabaos are bad



Fig. 4.5 Mora/Moorish girl



Fig. 4.6 Blanca/White woman

and in coal mines (Ibid.: 81-82). Anybody with slightly slanted eyes is likely to be called chino, identified with this early mixture or that which took place starting in the 1870s as Chinese continued to migrate as business people (e.g. so-called “californianos” arriving via the Golden State), and continuing throughout the 1920s and 1930s as ambassadors, and students. White folks in Cuba would not really be considered white by U.S. racial standards. They are slightly dark, tawny, marked by the influence of the Moors on their Spanish ancestors and by over 500 years of sharing the island of Cuba with descendants of Africa and more recently arrived Chinese. They are not considered white alongside U.S., French, or German whites, for example. In Cuba people with certain physical traits “close enough, although sometimes not very close, to the original Iberians that colonized the island at the end of the fifteenth century” (Martínez 2007: 8) are considered white. This phenotype is preferable when it comes to attractiveness and social acceptability, although it does imply the clumsiness and lack of grace/rhythm attributed to whites in the U.S. True influence is marked by access to white partners, as they are considered best for love and marriage. This is linked to a system that assigns social positions by color, and endeavors to keep darker peoples subordinate and marginalized. This mentality has been passed almost completely intact to the present generation, through contemporary accommodations, circumstances and distinctions.

It is clear that Africa has permeated Cuban culture, in everything from the exquisite shades of skin, the rhythms of speech, and the nourishment from dance and music, cuisine, and worship⁶³. However, elements that are too purely African, that reveal the legacy of slavery (i.e., blacks’ weaker economic position or shorter history of formal education), or awaken fears of violent protest are rejected. It seems that positive evaluations of black are anomalies that disrupt the normal perception of black as bad, antisocial, inferior. Dynamic, talented blacks are sometimes referred to as *blancos*

⁶³ People say “Quien no tiene de congo tiene de carabalí.” Literally the phrase means, ‘who doesn’t have congo [African] blood, has carabalí [African] blood’; all Cubans share African genetic and cultural heritage according to this view. “Quien no tiene de dinka tiene de mandinka” is synonymous (Leymerie 2002: 10).

echados a perder (white folks gone to waste). Blacks, especially women, are said to be best suited for labor rather than love. *Negrito* is a common derogatory diminutive. However, at the same time *negro* or *negra* is also a term of endearment regardless of your loved one's color.

Indeed, the person that resembles the Black Cuban most is the White Cuban. Both share the same ethnicity—the same habits, customs, religion, approach to life, taste for food, rhythm and musicality, and in many cases the same ancestors. Whites in the European sense, and Blacks in the African connotation are both in the minority in Cuba after the long and historical miscegenation that has taken place over centuries (Martínez 2007: 11).

Most people there would agree that, in the words of Cuba's national poet Nicolás Guillén, Cubans are “*todos mezclados*” (all mixed up). This mixedness is an important part of Cuban identity and what is called racial democracy. Used in different versions in Cuba, Brazil, and throughout Latin America, this view contends that race is no issue because diverse elements have fused through *mestizaje* into a cosmic race⁶⁴. This stance at once moves to include (at least rhetorically) all members of the nation regardless of color; and at the same time, denies any space or reason for the struggle for equality based on race, in response to racism. Racial democracy proclaims the problem of racism solved, even though to do so it must ignore vast disparities in quality of life and access to opportunity between the races. In Cuba this way of thinking is associated with Cuba Libre: the struggle for a sovereign Cuban nation, linked to Martí's notion that, “being Cuban is more than being black, more than being white”.

According to Cuba Libre, this level of racial cohesion is necessary to create and sustain the nation. Endeavoring to engage issues of race head on, rather than through

⁶⁴José Vasconcelos wrote of a “fusion and mixing of all peoples” out of which would emerge “the definitive race, the synthetical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples and [therefore] more capable of true brotherhood and true universal vision.” Also called Latin American exceptionalism, it suggests too that race relations in Latin America are more harmonious than in Anglo America, especially the U.S.: “the ethnic barricading of those to the north in contrast to the much more open sympathy of those to the south (Vasconcelos 1979: 18-21).”



Fig. 4.7 Café con Leche

discourse about the nation or social class has been interpreted as racist (Helg 1995, de la Fuente 2001). Since the abolition of slavery (1886), resurfacing at various points in Cuban history, there has been an anxiety about black enclaves that could threaten the cause of Cuban national unity in the face of both Spanish colonialism and, after 1898, U.S. economic and political imperialism. This “black peril” has been used always to thwart blacks’ claims for equal citizenship.

Actually, darker-skinned Cubans never wanted to govern the White people, nor at any time were they interested in monopolizing power in Cuba. They want their final emancipation, and freedom from being categorized on the basis of the color of their skin and the features of their phenotype. They want their rightful and true place in Cuba, full recognition as a collective self, and bold futures and aspirations like any other human. They want to be completely equal in all aspects of life to the rest of their compatriots and to share the political, economic, and social power that has been exclusively in the hands of the lighter-skinned population (Martínez 2007: 124).

Fidel called Cuba an African-Latin country, “the blood of Africa” running deep in its veins. In fact, “few nations can boast the advances made in Cuba since the Cuban Revolution in breaking down institutionalized racism”. Even still, however, “it would be shortsighted to think that racism has been eliminated” (Sarduy and Stubbs 1993: 7). Assata Shakur echoes this opinion noting both shortcomings and gains regarding the race question that signal contradictions in people’s consciousness and society in general: “Some people think light skin is good, that if you marry a light person you’re advancing the race. There still needs to be de-eurocentrizing of the schools, though Cuba is further along...than most places in the world” (Parenti 2003: 430).

Unlike Carlos Moore, who sees Cuba’s Revolutionary government under Fidel Castro as but an extension of paternalistic, white supremacist rule on the island (Moore 1988: 354), Sarduy and Stubbs and Shakur emphasize that progress has been made

toward racial equality⁶⁵. Still, some argue, “the day-to-day experiences and expectations of white Cubans have nothing to do with those of darker-skinned peoples. There are wide and systematic inequalities of status and power between the two groups and this biased power relationship exists outside and beyond social classes” (Martínez 2007: 19).

Part One: Barracoons, Cabildos, and Societies

Africans enslaved to cultivate cane sugar were housed in the baracón (barracoon, slave quarters), and there an incipient Afrocuban culture developed. The barracoon was “a grand jail house, multiplied throughout the sugar plantation zone, where the slaves lived like prisoners” (Barnet 1981: 195). Slaves were considered property, forced to labor to create wealth for Spanish colonial masters. This housing style with two rows of stalls/rooms facing each other, no ventilation, and one main entrance that was locked at night reflected their degraded state. Still, the slaves practiced African religion and herbal medicine, played games, and made music to ground and exalt themselves.

“The game of Mayombe was linked to religion...you played Mayombe with drums. You put a nganga or big pot in the middle of the patio...The blacks asked about their health, and their brothers’ and sisters’ health, and asked for harmony among them” (Barnet and Montejo 1994: 26). The Africans possessed “saving myths and a philosophy that gave them a security the whites lacked” (Op. cit.: 249). Members of various African ethnic groups lived side-by-side and intermixed. In the midst of the hard work and suffering, they developed a sense of collective identity. The same can be said of the solar, which developed later—an urban freedmen’s barracoon, if you will—where poor families live in close quarters and Afrocuban cultural practices like rumba flourish. The

⁶⁵ Sarduy believes that Moore’s intense feelings about racism’s persistence in Cuba are due in large part to his upbringing in Camagüey, a particularly racist portion of the island, and the only heartland of Black Nationalism in mid-20th century Cuba. “His experience of race there, and his early, fleeting firsthand acquaintance with revolutionary Cuba (1962-64 were the only years he returned to live and work in Cuba) are clearly what fueled his extrapolation of race suppression ever since in Cuba (Sarduy and Stubbs 1993: 24).”

presence of Asians and whites in these marginal spaces meant they participated too culturally, just as they mixed genetically.

Cabildos

Another important space that contributed to the Afro Cuba we know today is the *cabildo* (Fernández 1994: 7; Bastide 1971: 9), established in urban areas in contrast to the rural *barracoons*. The *cabildo* tradition came to Cuba from Seville and was aimed at organizing social classes on the basis of mutual aid and religion⁶⁶ (Moreno 1999; Ortiz 1992: 6). In Cuba they specifically functioned to organize—receive, orient, and regulate—Africans brought to the island according to their various ethnic groups or “nations”. Distinct ethnic groups formed separate *cabildos*. Ortiz refers to Cuban historian Hortensia Pichardo’s definition of the *cabildo* as a “reunion of blacks directly from Africa (*bozales*) in houses established for the celebration of [Catholic] feast days, on which they play drums and other instruments from their country” (Ortiz 1992: 1). Dance events were among the greatest attractions for the members and an important reason for *cabildos*’ longevity (even up until the time of Ortiz’ writing on the subject in the 1920s). However, dance was second to mutual aid or self help among the *cabildos*’ priorities (Ibid.: 7). As benefits earned through dues and proper conduct, *cabildos* cared for sick members, paid burial expenses, and bought the freedom of elder slaves (Ibid.: 6).

The *cabildos* were usually headed by the oldest male member who was called the king (*rey*) or captain (*capataz, capitán*) of the organization. There was a queen of the *cabildo*, as well as other posts like flag bearer (*abanderado*), and the king’s second in command, the mayor de plaza (Ibid.: 2). Despite the high levels of organization that Ortiz documents, he cites Pichardo again saying that any meeting of inept, disorganized people can be called a *cabildo de congos*. Thus Ortiz shows that *cabildos* were subject to

⁶⁶ *Cabildos* of gypsies and African slaves were common in Spain and Portugal, as slavery had been practiced there since the 8th century (Roy 2002: 13; Moore 2007).

racism and the prevalent notion of black inferiority as a natural condition. In the Cuban republic of the early 20th century, middle class blacks that desired to create intellectual, “modern” organizations, also ridiculed these older groups as antiquated and too African. Most cabildos had their own buildings (especially during the 18th century) in addition to being incorporated as *cofradías* (associations) with parochial churches. They were connected to yet separate from dominant state and religious authority.

Cabildos were used to control blacks, both slave and free. Part of their aim was to “thwart the unity of the slaves and keep alive rivalries among the different tribes and ethnic groups” (Fernández 1994: 7; Moore 1997: 16). They also made sure that Cuba’s africanity was expressed in prescribed ways at specified times and places. Cabildos were carefully regulated and subjected to the authority of established powers with the right to approve or not its rules, to review its accounts, and even dissolve it. This facilitated political control over the ethnic group more effectively than if the individual members, especially the free ones, were dispersed and uncontrolled, associating among themselves in non-institutionalized social gatherings (Moreno 1999: 7). One official statement from 1835 makes this clear: “The cabildos and dances of the blacks can only be celebrated on signaled festival days and at the *margins of the city*, from 10 am to noon and from 3 pm until prayer time, under penalty of four ducados for cabildo organizers, double for the second violation, and relief from duties for a third infraction” (Moore 1997: 10; italics mine). If music/dance was not the soul, it was surely the heart of the cabildo organizations (Ortiz 1992: 9). The heart could not beat freely, as it were. Neither was it totally controlled.

Cabildos were also used for mutual aid and cultural continuity. They helped preserve African religious practices and music, which are extremely important carriers of African culture in Cuba (Bastide 1971: 9)⁶⁷. Cabildos allowed perhaps the most

⁶⁷John Mason, for example, points out that in the Americas, African music has proved to be far more permanent than language and has even helped to preserve language (Mason 1992: 2).

important manifestations of reaffirmation and reproduction of black collective ethnicity. These institutions were the principal loci, and sometimes the only ones, in which a type of associationism not tolerated by the authorities in other contexts could develop (Moreno 1999: 3). Africans were provided a semblance of family structure, slavery having shattered the nuclear and extended family. African traditions were able to survive due to continued practice. Cabildos were institutions of social control which also facilitated African cultural continuity, as Yoruba, Ewe, Bantu, Wolof and other Africans and their descendants—along with Spanish and Asian elements—became Afrocubans⁶⁸. Located at the bottom of the social order, the cabildos gave the only (or at least one of the few) opportunity for blacks in the Spanish world to organize, whether in Sevilla or Havana. In Cuba, the cabildos “became indisputably the meltingpot that enabled the cosmogonies, languages, musics, songs, and dances related to those systems of worship to preserve their life and significance” (Roy 2002: 13).

Starting in 1764 cabildo processions would converge on the colonial palace on January 6, Día de Reyes (Day of the Three Kings), to perform—with drums, dance, and song—for officials and their families. This practice continued until 1885. During these festivities, “Africa, with her children, clothing, music, languages and chants, dances and ceremonies, religions and political institutions, was transported to Cuba, principally to Havana” (Op Cit.: 25). Slavery eased up on the occasion of celebrations like Día de Reyes, or the saint days of the Virgin of Regla (September 8) and Saint Barbara (December 4). Ortiz affirms that there is, “an intimate relationship between the cabildos, the Día de Reyes celebration, and modern comparsas that still roam the streets of Havana” (Ibid.: 38).

⁶⁸Each generation in this process of transculturation had its own denomination. Those born in Africa were called *negros de nación* (nation, in this case, referring to ethnic groups); their direct offspring, Cuban born children of African born parents, were *criollos*; and the children of these last, offspring of Cuban born blacks and grandchildren of Africans, were called *reyollos* (interview with Carlos Aldama 2004).

The participation of cabildos in these celebrations allowed Africans displaced in Cuba or born there to adapt and extend processional purification rites from various parts of West Africa (44). In this way, cabildos and their processions maintained sacred knowledge and embodied wisdom⁶⁹. These were medicine men and diviners (or representations of them), not always simple jesters. The magico-religious systems which cabildos and processions helped to preserve continue to shape people's life experience in Cuba. Nancy Morejón affirms being shaped by these forms of cultural expression and resistance, even though she was from an atheistic family in the 1960s Revolutionary era (Behar 1998: 131).

The cabildos provide a valuable perspective on the maroon mentality we have been discussing so far in relation to Afro Cuba. Runaway slaves preserved life and culture by absconding to the hills; both spiritually and physically establishing for themselves a home base away from the center of power in Cuban society. Urban slaves in the context of the cabildo, however, used the maroon mentality in a different way, by "hiding in plain sight" (Sublette 2004). They absconded internally—and within the paradigm of colonial control, represented by royal decrees and Christian religion, for example—responding to asymmetrical power relations in a symbolic way (Moreno 1999) through performance.

Carnival processions were periodically prohibited, either as punishment for slave revolts or during wars of independence, when combatants took advantage of masquerades to obtain arms and spread news; they were definitively prohibited during the 1884 Feast of the Epiphany (Roy 2002: 35). In the aftermath of slavery, the principal players in the carnival were precisely the former slaves and their descendants, the mulatos, and poor

⁶⁹ Many of the outlandish costumes dawned during the festivities represented the priestly casts of various African religious systems. According to Ortiz for example, the so-called *culona*—masked dancer with a wide grass skirt that hides what seems to be an exaggeratedly large buttocks—comes from the African word *kulona* or *lonna*, which means "sabio" or wise one. Classic characters, like *la culona*, *el alacrán* (scorpion), and *la vibora* (snake), in post-emancipation carnival comparsas are directly descended from figures in cabildo processions (Roy 2002: 36).

whites who lived side by side on the outskirts of Havana, making commentary on current events, either directly or through double meaning (Ibid.: 36). Many times “drums were hidden away, and rituals continued covertly, even attracting whites and orientals” (Leymarie 2002: 12). Works such as Benny More’s song “Los compondores” derive from old cabildo tunes (Ibid.). Many of the musical and philosophical elements at work in timba were preserved largely through cabildos and their processions. Using the same performative language (the procession, the circle, call and response, etc.) timba establishes alternative, resistant black cultural space. This space and the discourse therein are neither totally separate from nor antagonistic toward ‘white’ Cuba. In this way they promote integration and wellbeing on the community and national level.

Fernández Robaina emphasizes that, “it was not only art and mystic wisdom that Cubans inherited from the Africans and their descendants” (Fernández 1994: 8). Love of liberty, human dignity, and rebelliousness in the face of injustice are their legacy too. The closing of the cabildos by the Spanish after abolition (1886) meant that other organizations or institutions would function as the main spaces for Afrocuban cultural expression. In 1887 the colonial government forced cabildos to submit to fellowship legislation that transformed them into mutual aid societies open to all people of color (regardless of African ethnic origin), under the aegis of a catholic saint (Roy 2002: 13).

El Directorio Central de la Raza de Color (Central Directory of the Colored Race)

El Directorio Central de la Raza de Color (Central Directory of the Colored Race) was one of the most important black organizations at end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth centuries (Fernández 1994: 23), and as such reflected important issues and struggles of the times from the perspective of Afrocubans. Founded in 1887 by Juan Gualberto Gómez, its goal was to organize and coordinate unified action among Cuba’s many cabildos and mutual aid societies of color (Ibid.: 24) and challenge Spanish authority (Helg 1995: 35). This way Afrocubans could counter the ethnic and class

divisions that cabildos fostered, without disturbing their positive functions of mutual aid and cultural continuity.

El Directorio also looked to clarify the position of Afrocubans and their claims to equality vis-à-vis Cuban society. Their constant claim was that blacks were not a danger to the country: “No, we are not inciting race war by demanding equal social conditions among the inhabitants of this country. On the contrary [the ones who are fomenting the fear of a race war] are those who refuse to give blacks equal rights, and who take our claims for aggression...there is no race question, what is at hand is only the fight for justice, progress, and equality” (32). To this end, they sued white or Chinese individuals for discrimination. Not intimidated when provincial courts ruled against equality, they exhausted all legal possibilities and brought their cases to the Spanish Supreme Court in Madrid. There they often won and directly contributed to the promulgation of new nondiscriminatory legislation. They then took action to ensure that new laws were carried out at the local level (Helg 1995: 36).

From its founding until 1894 El Directorio won legal victories granting equal access to public places and schools, the right to travel in first-class carriages, and the right to be called don or doña in official documents (Martínez 2007: 91,100). So strong was the Directory’s organizational network and record of service that Martí (from abroad) chose its head, Juan Gualberto Gómez, as the coordinator of the independence movement in Cuba (Ibid.: 101).

In that spirit, the publications *La Fraternidad* and *La Igualdad*, both also inspired and directed by Juan Gualberto Gómez, demanded equal rights for Cubans of color and linked this struggle to Cuban independence in the years leading up to the war. They also called for union between blacks and mulatos within the community of color (Helg 1995: 29). Comparative analysis of Cuban and North American racial systems led to the argument that Afrocubans stood to lose a lot if the Island became annexed to the U.S. or fell too much under its influence; since “Yankee authorities would protect whites more

than blacks, [and] blacks and mulatos wouldn't be allowed to board trains, pray in the same temples, etc. (Ibid.: 32)".

El Directorio was short-lived despite its serious attempts to unite the black mutual aid societies and orient them towards a politics of social development and uplift for blacks in colonial Cuba (Ibid.: 25). It ceased to function with the start of the War of Independence in 1895 and was replaced by El Comité de Veteranos y de Sociedades de la Raza de Color (Committee of Veterans and Societies of Color), which was also short lived. The incipient nation's concern with achieving independence and the need for a unified, raceless, front, followed by the prohibition of political organizing based on race, undid them.

El Partido Independiente de Color

In 1908 the Agrupación (later called Partido) Independiente de Color (PIC) was founded under the leadership of Evaristo Estenoz who said: "free men deserve two things: to be loved and respected...and if the first cannot be achieved spontaneously, the second must be imposed" (53). Up to that point political parties in the new republic had only used the black vote to gain political advantage, but had done little to help Afrocubans (Helg 1995). Blacks were represented in small numbers and by politicians who were considered figureheads. The demands of PIC included, among other things, free education for all from six to fourteen years of age; free university education; an egalitarian republic without distinction of colors or class separation; and free immigration for all races, as long as they were willing to work for the well being of Cuba. *Previsión* was the publication of PIC. Their platform in some ways presaged the reforms of the 1933 revolution and the 1959 revolution under of Fidel Castro.

The Morua Law⁷⁰ was passed in 1910, outlawing political organizations along racial lines. This precipitated armed protest in Cuba's eastern province by the PIC in 1912. The protest was violently repressed by government troops sent by President Gómez, resulting in the slaughter of around 4,000 Afrocubans, many of whom were not protesters (Portuondo Linares 2002). The event is referred to as the La Guerrita (Little War). It shows that there was no perfect union among Cubans of different colors. On the contrary, "Cuba was profoundly divided along racial lines, and white Cubans continued to look at their compatriots of color as the other and the enemy...to be paralyzed and placed on the margins of society, and permanently kept in a subordinate position" (Martínez 2007: 121). Any attempt by Afrocubans to establish their own political, economic, and social agenda, in order to achieve full recognition and equality, constituted a mortal threat. With the demise of black political organizations, Afrocubans developed new ways and new methods of struggle, according to the new realities, to achieve their goals (Ibid.: 129).

Sociedades de color

After around 1890, *cabildos de nación* were progressively replaced by *sociedades de color*. Black organizations established by middle class professional Afrocubans became numerous throughout the island, adapting the Spanish immigrants' type of mutual aid society to their needs of separate entertainment, community assistance, and integration in the wider society (Helg 1995: 30). After political organizing along color lines was prohibited in 1910, they professed a strictly nonpolitical and non-religious focus. They were intended for mutual aid, cultural development, and networking. Various *sociedades de color* also founded small elementary schools for the children of their members (Ibid.). As important centers in the Afrocuban community in the context

⁷⁰Actually an amendment to an electoral law (Portuondo Linares 2002: 53).

of a political system with full manhood suffrage after 1902 (women gaining the vote too after 1934) they came to wield significant political influence.

Especially after the advent of North American whites-only social clubs in Havana and lasting until the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, *sociedades de color* (social clubs or societies of color) became the most important groups for Afro Cubans apart from religious cult practice (which was largely clandestine). While whites attended a social club called Casino de la Playa, blacks had the Unión Fraternal and Club Atenas. In addition to mutual aid the societies also organized dances. Like in barracoons and *cabildos*, this was a space apart, removed from the mainstream, where a strong Afro Cuban culture continued to develop. Soon after the Revolution triumphed in 1959 these societies were disbanded because, at last, all of Cuba was for all Cubans. They were considered unnecessary. Once again a space for Afro Cuban discourse was shut down. This forced a shift in how and where the discourse would continue.

“Ideales de una raza”

During the time of the *sociedades*, which were officially nonpolitical, black Cuban thinkers wrote about race relations and politics. Between 1928 and 1931, a Sunday column called “Ideales de una raza” (Ideals of a Race) by Gustavo Urrutia espoused and analyzed the sociocultural concerns of Afro Cubans. It opened up a forum for dialogue between both black and white intellectuals in a kind of call and response format. “Ideales” was not the only publication dedicated to such concerns. However, its publication as a column within a very widely distributed periodical called the *Diario de la Marina*, rather than independently, gave it a large, diverse readership (Helg 1995: 126). A section within, ironically called “Armonías” (harmonies), discussed the racial system in the U.S. and, like the earlier papers, emphasized how much better the Cuban situation was, despite its problems. “Ideales” printed translations of the works of W.E.B. DuBois and Atenor Fermin, and provided weekly bibliographies of nonwhite authors in

Cuba. These kinds of publications were important in the process of making all Cubans aware of the social concerns and intellectual/artistic achievements of blacks in Cuba and abroad.

For white Cubans who would deny or ignore these accomplishments, the essays, reviews, interviews, etc. that appeared in “Ideales” emphasized that blacks were undeniably part of the soul of Cuba. It was a great source too for blacks and mulatos who doubted the greatness of their race, lacked perspective on their local condition, or were interested in following debates on the struggle for equality at home and abroad. It was also a principal showcase for Afro Cubanism/Afro Antilleanism and its various manifestations in literature, music, and the visual arts (Kutzinski 1993: 148).

Afrocuban Arts

In Cuba, African influence on the arts has been acknowledged as strongest in music and dance (Ortiz 1993:12). Moore, for example, notes how by the mid nineteenth century a number of Afrocuban slave genres emerged or gained prominence: “*tajona* and *yambú* dances, the *baile de maní*, and other precursors of the present-day traditional rumba; sacred song and dance associated with *Santería*, and related ceremony; and the *tango-congo* and *abakuá* music and dance performed by street revelers in Día de Reyes or Kings’ Day celebrations” (1997: 17). Syncretic Afrohispanic genres developed that were popular among working class Cubans of all races: *caidita*, *cachumba*, the *cangrejito*, the *contradanza*, and *danzón* (Ibid.). *Son*, *mambo*, *chachachá*, *pilón*, *coyude*, *tembleque*⁷¹ and other dances discussed later are more recent extensions of this phenomenon. The iconic entertainer Rita Montaner expressed this black and white, African-Hispanic blend: “That huge, little woman whose golden skin symbolizes the two races that crackle in her heart and leave her lips in one fiery breath” (Guillén 2002: 249).

⁷¹ Each is a genre of Cuban dance music with its own particular dance step.

Nicolás Guillén paid homage to the African root of Cuban music by writing poetry based on the rhythms of *son*. Writing about Cuban poetry he asserts that the first truly Cuban verses came from black voices (Ibid.: 96). According to him early Cuban poetry was lackluster because it copied Spanish bards, focused too narrowly on the concerns of white *guajiros*, or was based precariously on indigenous cultural sources which had long since been decimated (Ibid.). “Another kind of popular, anonymous poetry begins to show signs of life with a pure authenticity: it begins with the song, starting point of the poetic. Song loaded with rough salt, burning knavery, in which the man in the street releases his innermost feelings...the clear voice of el negro...” (Ibid.: 97). Despite the physical separation of slavery, Afro Cuba has made a permanent contribution to Cuban society and culture through verse.

The Afro Antillean or negrista poetry (much of which was, ironically, written by white authors) showed that black cultural expressions could give voice to cubanness beyond color, “ni negro, ni blanco” (100). “Not the guajiro...whose social dimensions were too limited, nor [the] Indian whose existence was a fantasy, could project a truly national poetry; only *el negro* in the flesh, beaten by the whip; the black fused with white...Afrohispanic drama, all the ineradicable *mulatez* of Cuba” (Ibid.).

Afrocubans in the labor movement and the Communist Party

The National Federation of Sugar Workers was founded in 1938, under the leadership of Jesús Menéndez, a black Cuban whose father had been part of the Liberation army in the last war for independence. He was a charismatic, knowledgeable leader until assassinated by an army official in 1948. No surprise that a union of sugar workers should be led by a black Cuban and defend black interests like the rights of immigrant workers from Haiti and Jamaica in Eastern Cuba. Lázaro Peña, a national trade union leader and Aracelio Iglesias, of the ports and harbor (stevedores) union were

Afro-Cuban labor leaders politically related to the Communist Party, though they had a strong appeal of their own.

Being so strong in the working-class and unemployed population, many Afro-Cubans saw the ideas of Marxism and the practice of the Cuban Communist Party as a way to channel their struggle for equality and collective advancement. Secretary general Blas Roca was the only non-white party leader in Cuba. In fact, the Cuban Communist Party was the only one to include equality and the eradication of racial discrimination on its agenda. Within the party other Afro-Cubans like Aracelio Iglesias, Severo Aguirre, Salvador García Agüero, and Nicolás Guillén held national responsibilities (Martínez 2007: 144). From the 1920s on, individually and collectively, Afro-Cubans used active participation in the labor movement and leftist political parties to advance the struggle for equality.

Section Two: Afro Cuba and Revolution

The mystical *güijes* that sang freedom songs (Sarduy and Stubbs 1993: 61) and the *cimarrones* who escaped slavery to establish settlements called palenques presaged the attitude and actions of blacks and mulattos when the first independence war began in 1868 (Fernández 1994: 14). Because of their subordinate position as slaves or peons and their passion for freedom, Afro-Cubans have been central in all of the Island's revolutionary struggles (de la Fuente 2001; Ferrer 1999; Helg 1995; Martínez 2007). They served valiantly, for example, in the Liberation Army that over a thirty year period fought three wars—the Ten Years War (1868-1878), La Guerra Chiquita or Little War (1879-1880), and the final War of Independence (1895-1898). This army was unique in the Atlantic world because it was integrated; black soldiers like Antonio Maceo and Quintín Banderas ascended through the ranks and even commanded white men. Some historians estimate that at least 60 percent of the Liberation Army was composed of men of color and that by the end of the thirty year period as many as 40 percent of

commissioned officers were of color (Ferrer 1999: 3). With each incarnation of Cuban revolution conditions have improved for blacks, but not as much as they should have.

As we have seen, Afro Cubans were disenfranchised under U.S. rule after the defeat of the Spanish in 1898, and massacred in 1912 for organizing and protesting about it. In the aftermath of the 1912 massacre, blacks' political voice is merged with that of all the Cuban working class in labor organizations; there was no black party or black voice. There is remaining inequality in contemporary Cuba as blacks are lowest and whites highest in the social hierarchy, and the gap widens between them in regard to health, wealth, and standard of living (de la Fuente 2001; Sarduy and Stubbs 1993; Sawyer 2006). In Cuba after the Revolution, the emphasis on Marxism and racial democracy limited Afro Cubans' sense of "linked fate" and worked, along with state repression, to prevent black mobilization (Sawyer 2006: 16). Moore suggests that the very term Afro Cuban (i.e. Cuban blacks as separate and distinct) was officially discouraged (1988: 102). Martínez cites what has been called the 'Enemy Theory', 'Siege Mentality', or 'Surrounding Syndrome' as a mechanism to put Afro Cuban concerns on hold⁷².

Many Afro Cubans express ambivalence about the Revolution. On one hand, they identify as its *co-owners*, because black soldiers have fought valiantly and decisively in all its battles, and are *grateful* because as the poorest Cubans they did benefit from education, labor, and housing reforms implemented by the Revolution. (This dual identification counters the view of blacks as only passive recipients of freedom, citizenship, and education, who should be grateful and not complain.) They also cleave to the Revolution because the alternative leadership option—Cuban Miami—is considered racist and reactionary (Sawyer 2006). Many Afro Cubans claim to be open to a

⁷²In this view any attempt to criticize continued racial inequality within the revolutionary-socialist society is viewed as an act of the ideological enemy working against the nation (Martínez 2007: 158). Its effect can be similar to that of the 'black peril', as it unfairly poses reasonable aspirations (like equality) as attacks against the nation.

different way of life—possibly but not necessarily capitalist—because nothing so far has sufficiently transformed their plight.

The system of color-based inequality has survived in Cuba from Columbus through to the present day. Steps taken by the revolutionary government had widespread effects for Cubans of all colors, not only blacks. Landless peasants received parcels of land and soft credits to assist them in their production. Electricity and telephone rates were significantly lowered, and rent payments were, by law, cut in half. Workers demanding higher salaries received them. Racial discrimination that covertly plagued some hotels, nightclubs, beaches and resorts was done away with. However, the revolutionary government has allowed little or no official space for a distinct Afro-Cuban agenda. The black and mulato population as a whole was submerged in the category of poor people needing poverty alleviation and nothing else⁷³. This is why the spaces inhabited by timba music are so important: like palenques, cabildos, sociedades de color, etc. they are focal points for the creation of Afro-Cuban discourse and expression.

Sarduy writes, “the abolition of slavery and independence from Spain, the 1930s labor uprising, the 1950s insurrection and the 1960s revolutionary euphoria were key moments in contemporary Cuban history when levels of unity and social cohesion were achieved that could bridge the divides [between races]. The return to a more routine social order almost inevitably entailed their resurfacing, in newly defined forms” (1993: 7). Following this line of thought, Mark Sawyer proposes the “race cycles theory” and the concept of “inclusionary discrimination” to explain the back-and-forth movement as well as contradictions in Cuban race relations. He argues that racial politics in Cuba “have followed patterns of opening and retrenchment that have been driven by the need of the state to mobilize blacks to support state projects and to protect the state from hostile forces” (Sawyer 2006: xxi). In his work he relates the effect of the state on racial

⁷³ Historian Tomás Robaina cites the closing of Afro-Cuban clubs—though coherent in terms of the ideology of the times—as a shortsighted error by the Revolutionary leadership, which hindered the struggle toward equality for blacks in Cuba (interview 2003).

politics and highlights the agency of subordinated individuals/communities to transform racial politics. The race cycles perspective has five central points:

First, racial politics is driven by mechanisms such as state crisis, regime change, racial ideology, transnational politics, and endogenous shocks to the system, or critical events. Second, mechanisms like state crisis, transnational politics, and critical events lead to transformations in racial politics. These transformations are followed by the process of state consolidation, which relies on racial ideology to limit and ultimately halt any gains made as a result of the mechanism. Third, because of conflicting state priorities, each mechanism provides opportunities for gains for subordinate racial groups, but it also places limitations on the magnitude and duration of these gains. The mechanisms that drive the change trend toward an equilibrium position of stagnation in the racial situation. Fourth, gains in racial politics are directly related, in positive fashion, to the magnitude of the state crisis, but the duration of the gains is inversely related to the degree of the crisis. Finally, following a significant shock and subsequent consolidation, a new equilibrium is created that is different from the previous one. As a consequence, racial ideology and policies are altered (Ibid.: 4).

In Sarduy and Stubbs' words, "there are two sides to every crisis: one bodes extreme difficulty while the other holds the promise of new possibilities" (Sarduy and Stubbs 1993: 11). While the 1996 Declaration of Havana endorsed UNESCO's "Slave Routes of the Americas" cultural heritage tour; and in 1998 the race issue was raised at length by the National Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC), there was also a demonizing of Afro-Cuban religions in the popular media. This accompanied a general bolstering of Hispano-Cuban historical and cultural hegemony, with Afro-Cubans excluded from meaningful roles in Cuban television and other media while Afro-Cuban folklore was commercialized for the tourist market (Sarduy and Stubbs 2000: 7). In the book *Afro-Cuban Voices* we hear on one hand from black families who see their educational and occupational mobility as a product of revolutionary change; and, on the other, from people who reflect on what they perceive as dire, unsolved racial problems.

Giselle, a college student of mixed black and white parentage whom I interviewed, says she loves Cuba but also wants to leave, mostly because of its underdevelopment and racism. She speaks of how extraordinary it was for her father—a successful white man—to marry her black mother. The more common thing would have been to have a child with her without acknowledging it, or simply to live together without formal matrimony. She remembers the things people used to say to her parents: “*Ay hombre*, how could you marry *her?!?*”, “Excuse me, but are you the mother or the nanny of this little [very fair skinned] girl?” (interview 2003). Their love was in line with the Cuban theories of *mestizaje*, race mixing, and Cuba Libre; yet still flew in the face of commonly held beliefs. Legal declarations cannot erase belief systems nor deeply affect interpersonal (as opposed to professional or civic) relationships. The existence of racism in interpersonal interactions like these raises strong questions about its existence in the machinery of government. After all, *individuals act* within the institutions. They may act out their personal beliefs, albeit unconsciously or against the expressed goals of the system of which they are an agent.

Another example suggests unequal access to wealth and restricted access to certain social spaces. One afternoon I was walking through Playa, a posh neighborhood in Havana, and entered a cafe at the corner of Seventh and Thirtieth streets. It seemed like another world, different from the Cuba I had seen up until that moment, although everyone was Cuban. Many people were talking on cell phones and drinking bottled water with their meals—pizza, hot dogs, fried chicken. As far as I’ve seen, any Cuban buying bottled water must be insane or rich; and I knew that not many of my friends could afford to have so much of these, for most in Cuba, high priced items. Everyone here to dine and *consumir* (purchase, consume) is white. A black woman janitor looks at me, at first with surprise, then gladness to see me. There is a pause and she smiles as I sip my bottle of water. Here the ideal of racial democracy is marked/marred by a distinct reality for black Cubans. Rather than formally segregated, they are structurally denied

access to sources of wealth that would give them entrée. The end result, still, is marginalization⁷⁴. This scene recalls Pérez' writing about U.S. influence in the island during the first half of the twentieth century (Pérez 1999). Status and identification with North American values were claimed and displayed through consumption of American products. Then too it was mappable by color.

In his novel *Priapos*, about Cuba in the 1990s, Daniel Chavarría describes an Afro-Cuban man who, “like many potential beneficiaries of the Revolution, never did understand it; but was not its enemy”. Without being a criminal, this character “refuses to ‘work for the government’ as the enemies of the Revolution would say, or ‘submit himself to the process’ as official government language put it” (2005: 56). This ambivalent connection reflects the “inclusionary discrimination” experienced by Afro-Cubans: limited access to the nation’s resources, persistent inequality and prejudice, despite official policy that guarantees the rights of all Cubans.

One recognizes pathways opened to blacks through the Revolution, and appreciates its noble goals and continued work to improve Cuban and world society. Many black Cubans certainly benefited from programs of the revolutionary government aimed at the poor and at promoting cultural revival. They felt proud about Cuba’s involvement in African liberation wars in the early 1960s (Congo) and in the mid-1970s (Angola), when Castro defined Cuba as not only Latin American but also as a Latin-African nation (Sarduy and Stubbs 1993: 6). At the same time, however, the pinch of reality has been a nagging pain, signaling continued systems of racial inequality. The economic crisis that has gripped Cuba from 1990 to the time of this writing has, among other effects, made the position of blacks in Cuba all the more precarious and ironic. Afro-Cuban culture (music, art, history, bodies) attracts foreign visitors that support the

⁷⁴I saw this in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil as well. Black Brazilians talked often of being the only black at a nice restaurant, or the only one resident in a chic neighborhood.

national economy, while blacks remain marginalized from political power⁷⁵ and access to wealth.

The breakdown of Cuba's integration into the eastern European bloc and the tightening of the 30-year-old U.S. blockade put the island under siege in such a way that black Cubans likened Cuba to a modern-day *palenque*—maroon or runaway slave settlement. Many blacks' response to the 'special period' of austerity in the new situation was that blacks were used to it; theirs had always been a 'special period', and now the special period was for all (Sarduy and Stubbs 1993: 4, emphasis theirs).

Amaury's Story

A friend of mine, Amaury, who is black, came to visit and ask for a loan. I gave it to him and afterwards we sat down to talk for a long while about many things. I mentioned to him how strange it was to see "white" Cubans (especially women) who in their speech, dress, and their swing seem quite tinged with black, but who at the same time are quite racist and denigrating toward things black. It was always a shock to observe. He assured me that I wasn't crazy, this happens all the time. He told stories that exemplify common conceptions of blackness in Cuba.

- 1) His mother felt in the right in an argument with a neighbor on the strength that "she was definitely lighter skinned" than the neighbor.
- 2) That same day a blond woman said to her black girlfriend in jest, "I'm gonna slap the black off you, and I'll be doing you a favor!" When it was suggested she was racist she could not believe it.
- 3) On a radio show Amaury sang a tune that imagines "What if God were black?" and a white man responded, "Yes, as fucked up as the world is, God *must* be black!"
- 4) A glass falls and shatters between two friends. If the black person is responsible people might say, "Look at his color and forgive him." (Mírale el color y perdónalo.)
- 5) During this time Pedro Calvo, a former lead singer from Los Van Van, sang "Esa rubia no quiere un negro palmao" (that blond woman doesn't want a broke

⁷⁵At the 1997 party congress, three black provincial first secretaries were promoted to the politburo. Juan Carlos Robinson Agramonte (Santiago de Cuba), Misael Enamorado Dager (Las Tunas), and Pedro Sáez Montejo (Sancti Spiritus) joined existing members Juan Almeida Bosque, Esteban Lazo Hernández, and Pedro Rodd Leal, making six out of a total twenty four politburo members (Sarduy and Stubbs 2000: 6). This kind of representation does not translate directly into political authority.

black man) underlining the low social perception of blacks and the value of wealth/consumption as redemption from that second-class status.

Amaury feels that blacks learn from a young age that they have no worth (no *tienen valor*). Like some scholars (Martínez 2007: 152), Amaury notes how, in school, Antonio Maceo is presented as mighty with a machete, but his superior intelligence and charisma are downplayed. Cuban blacks underestimate *themselves* and therefore underachieve, he says. In the words of Cuban historian Fernando Martínez Heredia, “That great indignity [slavery] cast a shadow over nonwhite Cubans”, which did not motivate them to redress their situation or seek rights, but rather served as a vehicle for low self-esteem and shame (Portuondo Linares 2002: xv).

Amaury was a self-described delinquent before he met Nehanda, a black American exile in Havana, who helped him to believe that black is beautiful⁷⁶. I talked with a man from Sudan, Arcangelo, who considers Cuban blacks fools because “they do not fight for their rights, they don’t express themselves, and do not value their own beauty and culture”. We both laughed a little at how black Cubans argue about “who’s lighter”⁷⁷. He highly respects American blacks because they have demanded their rights. Nancy Morejón too feels that African Americans have confronted and challenged some stereotypes that still exist in Cuba with little or no contestation or alternative image (Sarduy and Stubbs 2000: 165).

According to Morejón, in terms of television or other iconic representations of blackness, there are few alternatives to the slave, the sport star, the musician, or the brute type she calls “the black ogre”. “The black is seen as stupid, as someone who talks bad, who sweats and shouts and gyrates, and behaves in a socially inferior way” (Ibid.: 167). She gives praise to the work accomplished by the Revolution and notes that blacks have made progress: “never as much as now has there been such a visibly strong black and

⁷⁶See Moore 1988 and Brock and Castañeda 1998 for in depth discussion of African American and Afro-Cuban connections.

⁷⁷In the U.S. this is called being color struck. Our levity, however, ignored the seriousness with which blacks have fought within and for Cuba for a long time.

mulato presence in middle positions [of government leadership] that are sometimes more important than those at the top, because they are closer to reality” (168). However, she says, these strides are undermined and hidden by negative stereotypes. For example, “a great ballet dancer, a black Cuban ballet dancer acclaimed abroad, sees his image reduced because the image representing him is Boncó, the comic black on television” (Ibid.). This exemplifies Sawyer’s “inclusionary discrimination”: inclusionary because the dancer was trained in schools to which blacks had very limited access before the Revolution, discriminatory because the popular imagination (here the TV) still insists on black barbarism and inferiority.

For Morejón, music is the clearest expression of *cubanidad* (167). However, entering this discussion is dangerous, for as she warns, this view leads into the stereotype of “the bad black, the vulgar black that talks and acts bad” (Ibid.). She finds the connection in the adjective “chabacano” (vulgar) or the noun “chabacanería” (vulgarity) used often to evoke the black ogre or Boncó in regard to music and dance. “All Cuban blacks and mulatos get accused of [chabacanería] one way or another”, but this speech is almost never leveled at someone whose skin isn’t dark. Morejón is against the chabacanería that exists, but also sees behind the word a “rejection of the black” (Ibid.). She agrees with my friend Amaury that black Cubans accept these images and limit themselves: “it’s only a vision, and there’s a passivity: that is, I take that image, which is the image they give me of myself, and I accept it” (167). Behind the stereotypes there is “a noise, a terrible colonial rumbling, of values that are supposedly against those we have fought for” (168)⁷⁸.

⁷⁸She sees a resurgence of racism worldwide. Colonialism and racism never belonged only to Cuba. All over Latin America communities of Afro Latinos are gaining consciousness and demanding space with the power structures of their respective nations. See *A Rising Voice: Afro Latinos* <http://www.miamiherald.com/multimedia/news/afrolatin/index.html>

Ortiz too writes about the particular relationship of Afro Cuba to music in Cuba. “We understand Afrocuban music to mean that which the Cuban people received from the blacks from Africa, adopted with some modifications, and recreated in Cuba under the influence of the African musical traditions of various origins” (Ortiz 1993: 14). Furthermore, “Cubans have exported more dreams and delights with our music, more sweetness and power, than with sugar. Afrocuban music is fire, deliciousness; it is syrup, *sandunga*, and relief; like sonorous rum quaffed through the ears, uniting and equalizing people through its trade, dynamizing life itself” (Ibid.: 13). Unlike sugar, which was transplanted to the Caribbean and brought pain, Cuban music is *criollo*, homegrown, intended to provide relief and spread joy. “There is no doubt that the music most characteristic of Cuba, that which has given [it] resonance the world over is that music founded with African roots in this tropical melting pot, a product of black and white transculturation” (14).

Section Three: El poeta de la rumba

The discourse of Afro Cuba was begun with the first blacks arrived on the Island⁷⁹ and was extended and shaped by Maceo, Martí, Juan Gualberto Gómez, Rafael Serra, Lino D’ou, Evaristo Estenez, Gustavo Urrutia, Walterio Carbonell, Juan René

⁷⁹ The Iberian Peninsula whence the Spaniards came to Cuba, had had African slaves (among whites, moors, and jews) for centuries, as they arrived there regularly over land as part of the Muslim slave trade across the Sahara between West Africa, North Africa, and Mediterranean Europe. Their numbers and importance in Iberia increased with successful Portuguese exploration along the west coast of Africa from 1425 on (Davidson 1980: 60-65). By 1501, just nine years after Columbus’ “discovery”, the Spanish Crown made the first authorization to bring Spanish born, christianized Africans—the so-called *ladinos*—to the West Indies (Ortiz 1995: 4). In 1510, blacks were brought to Cuba from Hispaniola (Antonio Saco cited in Ortiz 1995: 7). By 1515 there came the first Spanish shipment of slave-grown sugar from the West Indies, and 1518 saw the first cargo of Africans shipped directly from Africa to the Spanish West Indies (Davidson 1980: 65). By 1527 there were already “a thousand or so” blacks in Cuba (Sublette 2004: 73). Therefore, if Africans did not reach Cuba earlier by their own navigational devices as some scholars suggest (Van Sertima 1976: 1-18), then at least within a few years of the so-called discovery they were present. Soon afterward Africans became the object of a specialized, large-scale international trade system. This continued until the last slave ship arrived in Cuba in 1873 (Barnet 1981: 268). Blacks from Haiti, Jamaica, and other Caribbean islands continued to arrive throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and contributed to the discourse of Afro Cuba.

Betancourt, Carlos Moore, Pedro Serviat, Nicolás Guillén, Nancy Morejón, and countless others including musicians like Chano Pozo. A recent song by Cuban singer Mario ‘Mayito’ Rivera, el poeta de la rumba, continues the discourse on Afro Cuba with rhythm and energy. In it he alludes to the history of pain and to the shame felt by some blacks about their color, their Self. His song is, however, no lament, but rather an affirmation and a challenge. At the start he locates his message in the discourse of Afro Cuba with the drum rhythm of rumba guaguancó, then by exclaiming a fragment of Fernando Ortiz’ motto “ciencia, paciencia, y conciencia” (science, patience, and conscience):

¡Conciencia!
Yo tengo la piel oscura
Así de negra es de pura
Tan dulce como el azúcar
De tanta caña cortada
Sabroso como el café
Que tomas cada mañana

I have dark skin
As black as it is pure
Sweet as sugar
From so much cane cut
Delicious like the coffee
You drink every morning

Here Mayito further situates his *canto* (song) in the discourse of Cuban history and Afro Cuba by setting up a counterpoint similar to that used by Ortiz as a metaphor for Cuba. Whereas Ortiz discusses Afrocuban and Hispanocuban (black and white, among other counterpoints) through the labor and social relations involved in the production of sugar and tobacco; Rivera offers sugar and coffee, both associated with black labor. His song takes a historically grounded approach from an Afrocuban perspective.

Mi piel tiene larga historia
Que si yo te contaría
Quizás así entenderías
El porque de mi sabor

Mi piel conoce el dolor
Amiga de la tristeza
Pero mi mayor riqueza
Es ser dueño del tambor

My skin has a long history
If I told you
You might understand my flavor
My skin knows pain
Friend to sadness
But my greatest wealth
Is that I own the drum

He sings of a history unknown to many. He sings of the ironic beauty of a flavorful culture born largely through pain. He claims the drum—Africa, blackness—as his greatest treasure. He is addressing all of Cuba: Amaury and all the Afrocubans who undervalue themselves and those who enjoy white privilege and power and would denigrate black as inferior. The last phrase, “My skin knows pain...” he sings twice, the second time ending in an impassioned cry! Then his *sonero* alternates with the following estribillos:

(1)

Negrito bailador, bendito sea tu color
Tú eres dueño del tambor

Black dancer, God bless your color
You own the drum!!

(2)

Negrito, moreno, chocolate

(3)

Oye como viene el negrito, oye como viene el moreno
Look, the black man is coming on!

The first chorus cites the propensity of blacks (negritos) to dance. The tone, however, despite using the diminutive “negrito” does not diminish the practice of dance or portray it as a quaint stereotype. On the contrary, it proclaims the power and honor of being master of the drum—a central cultural legacy from Africa maintained and

developed by Afrocubans. God bless your color, it says. Subtly employing the language of race, the second chorus moves from an ambivalent *negrito*, to a polite *moreno*, to unquestionably sweet *chocolate*. This transition traces an evolution of consciousness (¡conciencia!) that Afrocuban leaders and thinkers like Maceo, Juan Gualberto Gómez, Evaristo Estenoz, Rafael Serra, Carlos Moore, Gloria Rolando, and Nancy Morejón would probably endorse.

Along the way Mayito exhorts over and over again, “levántate” (rise up), “son las horas” (it’s about time). At one point he asks, “why do you get so mad when they call you Big-Lips?” We feel the cycle of suffering and struggle, action and reaction, which leads always to an improved but by no means ideal racial situation in Cuba. The condition of blacks has gotten better, and their contribution to Cuban culture is increasingly acknowledged and evoked for various ends. However, negative realities still exist even as fading shadows, receding against the light of the Cuban struggle for social justice. The final refrain proclaims that the black man, the Afrocuban community, is coming on, making progress. Mayito’s last words—*aquí to’ el mundo está mezclao* (every one here [in Cuba] is mixed)—bind Afro Cuba to the nation at large, invoking national unity in a way that invokes racial democracy, Cuba Libre, and Guillén’s “Cuban color”. He is clearly interested in nation building, not separatism. The key though is that he acknowledges the unique experiences and perspectives of Afro Cuba.

Conclusion

Afrocuban heritage is an entire body of knowledge, experience, and values, transmitted orally and through customary practice, stretching from the colonial era to the present day (Roy 2002: 15). This is the sense in which Morejón’s “Afrocuban essence” does really exist. It exemplifies the maroon aesthetic because it represents *embodied knowledge passed down from generation to generation* since colonial times. In the process a distinct Afrocuban culture developed, gifted with a popular imagination capable

of substituting elements and adjusting philosophical values to new social situations with great improvisational virtuosity (Barnet 1981: 265). This purposeful transmission of culture (elaborated by the techniques of raiding and improvisation) under hostile conditions has sustained the black population of Cuba and enriched the nation as a whole. I call it Afro Cuba. It is made of history that is both beautiful and ugly.

Since the beginning the aim of Afrocubans has been to gain recognized positions within the society and to act as full members of it. To survive along the way, they took refuge in cabildos, fraternal societies, celebrations and expressions of worship, encouraging unity and resistance against their oppressor. They expressed themselves at times through newspaper publications or through left-wing political organizations. As the spaces mentioned above were closed, new ones have developed where the discourse of Afro Cuba is carried on. Timba—the music of Cuba now—is black music, maroon music. *Mestizaje musical, música mulata*, musical mixture, stories to tell, open space filled with Afrocuban voices. Timba, as a development of Afrocuban music, uses the maroon aesthetic and expresses Afro Cuba, articulating Afrocuban social concerns—which are, it must be emphasized, more about nation building than separatist claims for blackness.

Chapter 5

¿Dónde están los especuladores?



Fig. 5.0 ¡Tremenda especulación! (Tremendous especulación—Paulito F.G.)

Chapter 5

¿Dónde están los especuladores?⁸⁰

“Man is a self-performing animal...in performing he reveals himself to himself.”
—Victor Turner (1986: 81)

“¡Tremenda especulación!”
—Paulito F.G.

Recently a social stereotype or character has surfaced in Cuba, referred to as the *especulador*, a seeming reincarnation of *los negros curros* discussed by Fernando Ortiz, also similar in some ways to the “dandy” of Renaissance Harlem (Hurstun 1985) and the modern day “sapeurs” from the Congo (Gandoulou 1989; Gondola 1999; Pype 2007). Typically male, the character is identifiable by the (real or affected) ability to enjoy the luxuries of expensive clothing, food, and entertainment, which the majority of Cubans only dream of, and also by the willingness to flaunt this privilege. In fact, the verb form—*especular*—means in Cuban vernacular Spanish “to show off” or “to high side”. The *especulador* is closely linked to the lyrical content of contemporary Cuban dance music called timba, as well as to the ways musicians and audiences perceive and “perform” to each other. I argue that there is a call and response of self performance that parallels the strictly musical call and response, acknowledged as essential to much African-based music by prominent ethnomusicologists (Alén 1999; Chernoff 1979; Manuel 1995). In this performative call and response musicians and their audiences engage each other with

⁸⁰ Where are the speculators?

language, dance, gestures, and attitudes that respond to the realities of Cuban life today. Social stereotypes or characters like the *especulador* based on ways of dressing, speaking, gesturing, and a kind of popular philosophy about how to confront reality are results of this kind of call and response dialogue. They are connected to music and its performance yet extend beyond them. In relation to music people use certain understandings of race, class, gender, and nation to “tamper” with their identity (Jackson 2001).

The figure of the *especulador* expressed in timba is important to analyze because it dramatizes the marginalization of AfroCubans in contemporary Cuba. Since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 Cuba has faced fast paced change as well as economic, political, moral, and physical strain. Like *los negros curros*, *especuladores* are the product of transculturation and diaspora, tied to specific social spaces, periods of history, expressing themselves through individual performance (Ortiz 1995: 1). Through what John Jackson calls “constellations of behaviors” they use “practices to shore up their identity” (Jackson 2001: 185, 187). The practices or actions they choose reveal a lot about issues of race, class, and gender in Cuban society. Ortiz predicted about *los negros curros* that “one day they [would] live again (Ibid.: 3)”, and it seems they have returned in the form of the *especulador*.

This chapter uses the anthropology of performance to study human behavior in the dance spaces of contemporary Cuba. I discuss the *especulador* as a kind of character—assumable by anyone, no matter their color, yet at once specifically tied to notions of blackness. As part of this performance people choose from and employ an array of understandings and representations of race, class, gender, and national identity. Above I outlined some key elements of popular music throughout the African Diaspora that help to explain why the *especulador* has appeared in Cuban dance spaces, to the timba beat (see chapter three). Here I will comment on the social atmosphere in Cuba from the early 1990s to the present, a period during which timba evolved as one of the most dynamic innovations in Cuban music (Acosta 1999: 10). I will weave my

discussion of the *especulador* around two poles “wealth” and “revelry” each of which holds a key to his significance as a cultural type, or way of being.

The *especulador* resists some dominant modes while reaffirming others, at the same time invoking folk wisdom through the persona of the *negro curro*. *Curros*, who lived in Havana as they had in urban Seville and Lisbon, were tied to the colonial slave system as workers and interpreters between subjugated Africans and European masters. They used European styles and took pride in their familiarity with European culture in general. At the same time, they too carried the maroon spirit. Their opposition, however, was not usually physical. Rather it was stylistic and performative: an internal stance expressed outwardly through adornment and a pronouncedly African way of being.

The *curros* were using both European and African styles to express their own unique identity in colonial Cuba. The braids displayed in Cuba a common African hair styling technique, perhaps affected also by a desire to imitate or satirize Spanish masters. Clothing styles popular in Seville, Naples, or Lisbon were worn according to aesthetic principles from Africa (Ortiz 1995b: 39-41). To make this point Ortiz discusses the importance of colored fabric, especially head wraps, in various continental African and black Atlantic contexts. The speech of the *curros* mixed the grandiloquence of Spanish bards and colonial governors with the ironic, defiant, verses of *la hampa afrocubana*, the Afrocuban underworld. According to Ortiz, through these elaborate outfits, outlandish speech, etc. the *negros curros* asserted their different status vis-à-vis other Cubans of color and the dominant white culture, because they were free, and because they were “closer” (to Spain) by virtue of their often transnational origins and metropolitanism. *Curros* used hybrid styles “to distinguish themselves as free blacks, to chart out and control their own public space, and resist conventional identity assignments” (Brown 2003: 16). Ortiz approves of the use of the *curro* “character” or “type” in contemporary carnival settings, happily stripped of the criminal associations of the real *curros* of the past.

Bands like La Charanga Habanera—latter-day curros—singing about *wanikiki* (money) and women, and driving convertible cars, are models upon which the especulador is based. Before analyzing him⁸¹ further, however, allow me to discuss the social circumstances in Cuba that conjured him into being.

Life in Contemporary Cuba, 1990-2000

Ask anybody in Cuba old enough to know and they will probably tell you that the 1980s were heaven. Cuba was a paradise relatively free of tourists, serious crime, and disease, where everything—food, medicine, education, and even some luxury items like televisions and cars—was available. The fall of the Berlin Wall in the autumn of 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Bloc in summer 1991 were, for Cubans, the entrance into a tunnel, a prolonged *apagón* (black out). Sixty percent of Cuban factories closed down or produced at bare minimum capacity. Electricity generation plummeted, as did food supply. By Latin American standards, no one was malnourished or starving in Havana, but the daily intake of vitamins and protein fell drastically⁸². After the fall of the Soviet Bloc, Cuba could no longer count on a network of trade, credit, and aid with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. One joke said, “The revolution has only three problems...breakfast lunch and dinner” (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 255). However, this crisis reached beyond physical hunger to affect Cubans’ very outlook on life.

⁸¹ As in many places, men in Cuba occupy a dominant position vis-à-vis women, who historically take on a passive role. Though this is changing, the image of the especulador is firstly male. Although women can use the self-representations that signal the especulador, men are first associated with that character, just as they are associated first with wealth, bread winning, and freedom to craft and represent themselves.

⁸² Scarcity of basic foods, a large portion of which used to come from the Soviet bloc, began to affect the physical health of the Cuban people in 1993. The Cuban public health system had received international acclaim as an accomplishment of the revolution, even by the most ardent opponents. In 1993, the government was forced to provide massive doses of multivitamins to its 11 million residents to compensate for an unbalanced diet. In the 1990s, and for the first time since the crisis in the beginning of the 1960s, food displaced housing as the number one social problem among the Cuban people. Further improvement in food supply, though mostly at very high prices, brought back housing as the main problem in the late 1990s (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002: 148).

The end of the Cold War also posed new threats to Cuban national security. The Soviet Union had provided a partial shield against the U.S. In 1992, President George H. W. Bush signed the Cuban Democracy Act after candidate Bill Clinton supported the then-Torricelli bill in an effort to win favor with Cuban Miami. Four years later, President Clinton reluctantly endorsed the Helms-Burton bill (Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act) after the Cuban air force shot down two U.S.-owned planes over international waters (Pérez-Stable 1999: 202-203). The result of all these shifts has been a crisis that is as much political, moral, and physical as it is economic.

The *período especial* or “special period” is the name given to the current time of austerity (Sarduy in Bettelheim 2001: 166). It means rationing as if the island were at war. Changes of the special period—collapse of the Soviet market, coupled with Cuba’s lack of capital, credit, and energy, exacerbated by the U.S. trade embargo—shook the economy and the collective spirit of the country. Giselle is a young woman musician (clarinetist, choral singer, and pianist) and musicologist. She is a *mulata*, daughter of a white father and a black mother, both of whom are doctors. She recalls the start of the special period:

I remember being around 12 years old and everything was fine. I did not want for anything, my parents took me often for ice cream and shopping. The family had a car, a gift from the State in return for outstanding medical service by my parents in Angola (1978) as part of Cuba’s project of intervention in anti-imperialist wars abroad. There were enough eggs to waste, throwing them about for fun or to disgrace those who were leaving the island, “abandoning” the Revolution. Paper could be thrown away. There was no stifling, ever-present “need” (*necesidad*). And then one day Fidel came on TV and said “Things are going to begin to get scarce now, but don’t panic...be patient.” And the very next day there was nothing in the stores, and soon after there was chaos, chaos, chaos. There was no gas, the car broke down and there was no way to fix it. Everything was scarce. It was a very sudden and jarring change (personal communication 2003).

Giselle's memories are instructive: this was a major rupture, a shock, and a crisis. In Havana's ever-evolving slang, the eggs she used to take for granted became known as *americanos* because no one knows when they are coming or how many there will be (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 256). There were no more Bulgarian canned vegetables, Russian canned meat, German sausages, or Hungarian wines and sweets (Ibid.). To cope with the shortage of fuel, cars like the one her parents owned were largely replaced by nearly one million Chinese bicycles, which were distributed through work places and flooded the streets of Havana (Kapcia 2005: 182). Because buses were few and far between, many habaneros traveled as many as five to fifteen miles to and from work every morning and afternoon. My godmother in Marianao quit work because she didn't earn enough to afford the shoes and clothing she "spent" traveling to and from her job (*porque gastaba demasiado en zapatos y ropa yendo pa'l trabajo*).

In the new situation food was scarce and luxury goods are for most out of the question. The fact that Carnival, so important to Cuban culture, was canceled altogether from 1991 to 1996 indicates how difficult things got (Sarduy in Bettelheim 2001: 166). Many had to go without even the respite of television entertainment due to shortages of electric power. Coppelia ice cream parlor stayed open, but going for ice cream became an all day affair, with lines sometimes four hours long. This example of Cuban humor, known as *choteo*, is common:

A man walks up to the Coppelia ice cream shop and gets excited "Coño, there's no line!" And the guard says to him "Not so fast, it's that there's no ice cream...Can you imagine a Saturday with no line at Coppelia!?"⁸³

⁸³ Un hombre llega a Coppelia y se embulla, "¡Coñó, no hay cola!" Y dice el guardia "Es que no hay helado...¡¿Tú te imaginas un sábado sin cola en Coppelia!?"

Cubans use this kind of dark, ironic humor to mock a very serious lack of resources. In order to create revenue and survive, Cuba has been forced to rethink its economic strategy. For example, unable now to trade sugar with the formerly Soviet nations in exchange for technology and oil, Cuba has placed new emphasis on its pharmaceutical industry, which has been only marginally successful (lecture by Cuban economist Pedro Monreal 1999). Economic ties to other Latin American nations like Brazil, Argentina, and especially Venezuela have been strengthened. Other changes have influenced popular music.

Economic collapse and recovery measures

In the decade of the 1980s, an important part of the monetary income of the population came from its relationship with the state—under conditions in which 95 percent of employment was state sponsored—and there was a salary system in place that insured a relatively low level of income inequality (Ferriol Muruaga 1998: 94). At the start of the special period the functioning economic model was basically one of centralized planning and the use of state rather than private capital to run the national economy. By 1985 adjustments were being made: for example artisan and farmers markets were opened, allowing some autonomous entrepreneurial activity. Those changes were already negatively impacting the social and economic spheres. However, it was not until later that Cuba would be forced to even more fully incorporate capitalist market strategies that were undoubtedly at odds with the nation's socialist vision.

There were various responses to the 75 percent import decrease caused by the fall of the Soviet Bloc. On a social level measures included: maintaining jobs and pay steady with only gradual adjustments, implementing a stepped up food rationing program, price hikes for luxury items (like cigarettes and alcohol), conserving social programs, especially health and education (with less access to medicine, but more doctors to compensate), as well as discussion and consultation with the public about these steps. Schools, hospitals, clinics, and other essential social services all kept functioning, albeit with less resources. Structural changes included opening the island's economy to foreign investment, joint-venture business, and tourism (González 1998).

On the macro economic level the most drastic change was the creation of a mechanism for the intake and circulation of divisas: legalization of the U.S. dollar. The so-called “dollarization” (Formento 2002) of the Cuban economy created an awkward situation in which most people—employees of the state—earn in pesos while many goods are available for purchase only in dollars⁸⁴. Some Habaneros were able to find refuge in the foreign business sector. Cluster and Hernández give the example of a white Cuban woman who, after feeling the sting of the special period and even engaging in the black market, finds work acquiring clothing and shoes to sell in dollar stores, also known as *el shopping* (259). Some in Havana opened home restaurants—called *paladares*—as part of the reinstated *cuenta propia* (entrepreneur) sector. Fifty or a hundred dollars sent or brought each month by relatives and friends living abroad began to signify, for many families without other income in dollars, a way to survive (262). Soon the total of these

⁸⁴ In 2004 the dollar was again removed from the economy. A “convertible peso” colloquially referred to as “el chavito” substituted it, equal in exchange value to the dollar against the Cuban peso. In this way, the dual system remains in place.

remittances equaled 800 million dollars throughout island (and concentrated mostly in Havana).

Habaneros of color, however, were largely shut out from this world, because they lacked homes to open restaurants and capital to start other kinds of enterprises (for example, small audio CD pirating businesses which require computers, discs, etc.). The feeling was common that, in this sector, old patterns of racial discrimination had reared their head (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 259; Sawyer 2006). Hence, as a dollar economy thrived, Havana also included many of those left out of the recovery: those working in health and education (like El Médico de la Salsa who left that field), and those in the traditionally blacker districts of Habana Vieja, Centro Habana, and Cerro who lacked remittances.

Though corner bodegas continued to distribute minimum rations of staple foods like rice and beans, the dollar stores became the main source for other basics like cooking oil, pasta, canned goods, dairy products, and soap. Throughout Cuba, but especially in Havana, efforts to generate hard currency—through employment in the foreign sector or remittances—accentuated differences between Cubans who have access to dollars and those who do not. As regards monetary income, what most contrasts the situation of the 1980s is that income associated directly with “illegitimate” work has become more important. This has made its mark and transformed, at least to some extent, accepted social values, such as the role of work, the benefit of working for state-run businesses, and the importance of education (op cit.: 95).

After being almost totally closed off throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and blossoming some in the late 1980s, Cuba’s leadership decided to fully embrace tourism in

the 1990s—welcoming visitors interested in the Island’s diverse terrain and unique wildlife, in need of healthcare and surgical procedures unavailable or too expensive elsewhere, hungry for Revolutionary lore, or in search of Afro-Cuban culture. By 1990 about 340,000 tourists visited Cuba, which increased 82 percent by 1994 to 619,000. Figures for 1995 reached nearly three-quarters of a million tourists, and by 1999 1.6 million people visited (Scarpaci, Segre, Coyula 2002: 291). Primarily European and Canadian investors engage in partnerships with the state to build hotels and increase Cuba’s popularity and viability as a vacation destination (Ibid.: 299-300).

Today tourism is Cuba’s number one industry, called the *zafra nueva* (new harvest) because it has displaced sugar as the largest moneymaker. “One of the most controversial projects in Havana in the mid-1990s was the construction of a new five-star hotel...the \$70 million Meliá Cohiba” symbolizing the push to attract tourist revenue (Ibid.: 301). Hotels like Meliá Cohiba, Hotel Riviera, and others, along with nightclubs are important spaces to attract visitors by presenting music. Like in Renaissance Harlem where jazz flourished, competition for patrons in Havana provided many opportunities for musicians to ply their trade. El Palacio de la Salsa opened up in Hotel Riviera in 1993. In the same year La Casa de la Música opened its doors. Both were closely associated with José Luis Cortés, timba, and entertaining foreign visitors. Cuban musicians are now allowed to tour in the U.S. and negotiate recording contracts with international companies to make money, a portion of which is retained by the state as tax.

This was unheard of before the special period (Acosta 1999)⁸⁵. The number of bands

⁸⁵ In the late 1930s, the Cuban government relaxed its rules against *comparsas* to satisfy tourists who were coming to Havana to see it in its natural habitat. Alejo Carpentier complained that “...when the black *comparsas* were reauthorized...they no longer had the same force; they had gained in spectacle and theatrical luxury...what they had lost in authenticity” (Sublette 2004: 435). More recently there has been a

that performed abroad from 1996 to 2000 is comparable to the number in the 1950s, when Cuban music experienced a previous boom (Roy 2002: 192).

As the Turquino Bar of the Habana Libre, the disco in the Comodoro, and the emblematic Tropicana became exclusive spaces for visitors with dollars, alongside La Casa de la Música and Palacio de la salsa, Cubans without dollars (who were overwhelmingly Afro-Cuban) experienced what some began to call “apartheid tourism” (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 259). The Malecón, always a center of activity, literally filled at night with people who came to socialize there—with guitars, homemade rum, and portable radios—because they could go nowhere else.

There exists what might be termed an “inverted social pyramid” in which so-called prestigious professions—such as doctor, teacher, or lawyer—have lost their mystique and earning power in relation to other activities. Activities associated with tourism and the emerging dollar-economy have become more valued (op cit.: 95). The inequalities and tensions of the market economy create the opportunity for so-called simple economic activities (i.e. selling cigarettes, homemade popsicles, or cigars) to be excessively lucrative (Ibid.: 26). As happened in the former Soviet nations, since the state could not supply people’s needs, they struggled to provide for themselves, developing in the process a huge repertoire of strategies for obtaining consumer goods and services. These strategies, called the “second” or “informal” economy, span a wide

similar flourishing of black musical spaces oriented to fomenting tourism. Carlos Moore accuses the leaders of the Revolution of “folklorizing” black cultural practices—including a process of decontextualization, commodification, and circumscription—in order to trivialize and disempower them (1988). According to Roy, “in 1996 [after being canceled several years] carnivals resurfaced in debased caricature form as spectacles for tourists” (2002: 39). Related to this process, Guillén perceived two registers of Afro-Cuban artistic expression. What he calls *modo*, as in *modo de ser* (way of being), refers to creations deemed genuine and from the soul; as opposed to *moda* (literally fashion), referring to work that is so commercially oriented that authenticity and value are lost. In the former there is spirit and in the latter only the image and trappings of *lo afro-cubano*. Robin Moore discusses this in the context of black music “whitened”, or exoticized throughout the 1920s and early 1930s (Moore 1997).

range from the quasi-legal to the definitely illegal (Verdery 1996: 27). Thus, inasmuch as there came to be little correspondence between “legitimate” work and income, Cuba risked creating or resurrecting previously suppressed social ills as people tried to make ends meet. Although this second society never took definite shape as it did in Poland, for example, where dissidents were inspired to live “as if” in a free country; the crisis of the domestic economy, the collapse of communism, and the erosion of the Fidel-patria-revolution saw the people adopt solutions like leaving the country or doing whatever was necessary to put food on the table (Pérez-Stable 1999: 200).

In addition to meeting basic needs, many Cubans (especially young AfroCubans) are eager to experience the lifestyles and material comforts to which they are exposed by foreign visitors (mostly from Spain, Italy, Canada, and Mexico) and by Cuban musicians who travel abroad and return as windows/bridges to the outside world. Cuba’s embrace of tourism and the dollar, without providing Cubans full access to either, creates tension within the society. This even more so for AfroCubans, who, historically, have experienced marginalization and lack to a greater extent than other Cubans. Today the verb “trápichear” means to work in the informal economy (Fernández 1997: 54). This comes from *trapiche*—sugar cane crushing machinery—evoking the long history of AfroCuban slave labor in sugar (see Friginals 1978, Ortiz 1995a). It is suggestive language because AfroCubans are excluded from legitimate economic opportunities and make do instead through the black market.

People often had no alternative but to purchase on the mushrooming black market. Only there could one find beans or vegetables brought privately from the countryside, as well as powdered milk, cheese, yogurt, and other commodities stolen

from the dollar stores in tourist hotels or those maintained for diplomats (*diplotiendas*). The black market value of the Cuban peso dropped to 150 per dollar in the early 1990s. While Havana saw, on the one hand, a tolerated and relatively well-off informal sector, there were greater levels of discontent and atomization (Kapcia 2005: 182). Skyrocketing inflation, scarcity of food and other life essentials, and a limited sense of individual agency in improving the situation translated into a vicious cycle that was altogether demoralizing (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002: 146).

This new attitude is precisely what is most disturbing (and criticized) about *Dirty Havana Trilogy*, the controversial novel by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez. The protagonist, Pedro Juan, and those surrounding him live in a constant struggle to *resolver*, to survive. They seem caught in a malaise of hopelessness that leads to depression and depravity, expressed through love-less sex and shady business. Pedro Juan raises pigs on the rooftop to eat and sell, manages a bootleg rum hustle, and on occasion exchanges sex for gifts from foreign visitors. Through Gutiérrez' work, we enter a Havana landscape where, "as the already weaker sense of community disintegrate[s] in the face of an individual search for survival; the greater the informal sector and ordinary Cubans' access to it, the weaker 'community' [becomes]" (Kapcia 2005: 183).

These are the folks who took to the streets by the hundreds on August 5, 1994, in the first tumultuous demonstration of popular discontent in Havana in twenty-five years (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 260). In response to this unrest the government announced the opening of new farmers markets where small farmers, cooperatives, and state farms could bring fruits, vegetables, and pork from the countryside to sell at prices regulated by supply and demand. These *agromercados* remained expensive in relation to average

monthly income, but were much cheaper than, more accessible, and less morally compromising than the black market (Ibid.)

As capitalist practices are reintegrated within a socialist framework, the neat duality of two systems in opposition to each other is destabilized. Furthermore, the second economy, which provisions a large part of consumer needs, is parasitic upon the state economy and inseparable from it. Rather than simple opposition the relationship between the state and the informal economy is symbiotic. As part of the turn toward the international music market, the term “timba” was coined to differentiate contemporary Cuban dance music—also called salsa cubana or new salsa—from the salsa of Puerto Rico, New York, and Latin America, in hopes of increasing its commercial success⁸⁶.

Locally, for the most part only Cubans who engaged the informal economy could afford to attend the new spaces like El Palacio de la Salsa or La Casa de la Música where timba was engaging international visitors. People’s behavior around music—in dance spaces, fiestas, discos, and clubs—often expresses that which for one reason or another cannot be said or sung. It comes out instead *bailando y estando*, dancing and being. For John Jackson Jr., interpretations of people’s everyday behaviors are useful because both race and class differences are often reckoned based on behavioral specificities. What people do locates them within their society in terms of race, class, and gender (Jackson 2001). This is precisely why it makes sense to think about the

⁸⁶ In 1997 the Dream Team Cuba-Timba Cubana was invented by Juan Formell to counter the Buena Vista phenomenon and cash in on renewed international interest in Cuban music with the new sound of Cuba’s younger generation (Roy 2002: 181). The group included highly visible bandleaders Adalberto Álvarez, José Luis Cortés, Paulito F.G., Issac Delgado, and El Médico along with other all-star musicians that emerged from each of these groups. According to producer Joaquin Betancourt, who participated in the project as an arranger, Dream Team Cuba failed in the end because it lacked unity. Each member wanted to impose his own style and did little to really collaborate with the other artists (interview 2003). This idea of *the individual over the group*—as displayed by these all-star timberos—is key to the especulador.

especulador. The especulador comes to life through consumption and the ways in which this is signaled to others, invoking at once the maroon and the curro of the past.

The especulador, though not mentioned overwhelmingly often by name, is implied in most timba. Paulito F.G. and other timberos contend that during the most difficult moments of the special period people found solace and escape through their music. People used the music “to forget the shortages, the cutoff electricity, the bad transportation, to find refuge” (interview with Paulito F.G. 2003). I argue that the character of the especulador, like timba, distills several reactions to the economic and subsequent moral and philosophical tensions experienced since the early 1990s. Through behaviors associated with the especulador people propose identities for themselves. By examining the especulador’s connection to wealth and revelry we can understand something about the current Cuban experience, the goals and desires of Cuban youth (especially Afrocubans), and about how musical and social structure, as well as musical and nonmusical performance interact. So how are Cubans reacting to the trying times of the special period? And what does the especulador have to do with it?

Definitions of especular and especulador

The expression “especulador” came into common parlance in 1992 or 1993, around the time that the U.S. dollar was legalized opening new economic and social “posibilidades” (possibilities) in Cuba (interview with Rafael Calderón de Armas 2003). Various informants use and define the especulador and the verb form *especular* in several different ways:

- One who is smug and artificial (*autosuficiente y artificial*)
- People with “possibilities”, ways and means (*gente de posibilidades*)
- Folks who like to wear a lot of gold
- Pamplinero/pamplinera, or foolish people
- One who shows off beyond his real means

One who has never had and wants to show off what little he's got now
A guy who wastes a lot to impress others
More fantasy than reality (*más fantasía que realidad*)
Someone who wants to show what he has to the society, and in a vulgar
way

Some people's ideas make clear reference to the Afro-Cuban experience of marginalization, as Cuba's have-nots. One well-known timba hit by La Charanga Habanera⁸⁷ exhorts an anonymous (Afro) Cuban woman to find a sugar daddy so she can have what she had to have (Pa' que tengas lo que tenías que tener). The song, with its exaggerated repetition of the verb "to have" (tener), puns on a poem by Nicolás Guillén, "Tengo" (I have) (Guillén 2002b: 62). In this poem he speaks as if for Afro-Cuban people grateful to the revolution, "I have what I had to have" (tengo lo que tenía que tener, i.e. education, equality, opportunity, etc.). The song by Charanga is interesting because it poses tener in the subjunctive mood: something yet to be achieved (or had), not quite reality. Thus it signals continued inequality, struggle, and necessity of action on the part of Afro-Cubans in the context of contemporary Cuba, referring even to the literary discourse on Afro-Cuba by one of its most important voices. In the song a male voice commands/suggests that a woman engage another male to achieve economic stability. This signals the subordinate position of women in Cuba as well. This other man, with his motorcycle and his *wanikiki* (money), as the song states, fits the description of the especulador. Thus the especulador embodies the marginalized positions of Afro-Cubans and (especially Afro-Cuban) women.

Many identify the especulador with negative characteristics like falseness, foolishness, or vanity based on external trappings like gold displayed to gain social capital. Everyone has stories about silly people who put on airs of superiority as they wear expensive foreign clothes, etc. Maibelys Carión, a dancer, laughed as she told me

⁸⁷ "El Temba" (the middle aged man) from the album *Pa' que se entere La Habana* (So that all of Havana finds out) on Magic Music label, 1995.

about a man who loudly ordered “beer for everybody, on me!” when really his friend would pay. Musician Pedro Fajardo felt that “to speculate” (*especular*) is to think one’s self a God, or “endiosarse” (interview 2003). In contrast to these evaluations, another informant, Rafael, had a different opinion about *especulación*. He was an intelligent, streetwise man of about 40 years who had lived many lives⁸⁸. For him, *especular* (the act of being an *especulador*) is the way each person expresses his or her Self (*su propio yo*). Here the *especulador* bears no stigma. Rafael’s grandfather had always told him, “according to how [you] dress will be [your] social position” (see Fig. 4.2).

Their experiences as dark skinned Afrocuban men impressed on them the importance of representing outwardly (performing), through signs like crisp white clothing and clean two-tone shoes, their perceptions of themselves and their hopes for social recognition and success. Because biology (their phenotypic blackness) and geography (their social and physical location among the lower/working class) were set, action was their only way of “tampering” with their identity. If they fail to do their identity⁸⁹, identity will certainly, constantly be done to them in the form of race/class exclusion, even in Cuba Libre (de la Fuente 2001; Helg 1995; Sawyer 2006). This “specific conflation of identity and behavior is a potentially useful way of hewing antiessentialist social identities” (Jackson 2001: 5).

Rafael, his grandfather, and many more black men and women in Cuba construct their own identities through action/performance, in spite of and against negative expectations and stereotypes, which also shape their lives (see chapter four). As we shall see through the *especulador* (and later through the public dance), what people do—the clothing they choose, dance, socializing—determines how they are read by others, and to some extent who they are. In the process, sometimes elements of the social scene, like

⁸⁸ A devotee of Changó, he had been jailed in the 1990s for being in possession of U.S. dollars (at the time illegal on the island). He was currently employed by the state as a repairman for cooling equipment for hotels and movie theaters. He claimed that because of his life experiences he was unafraid to speak his mind.

⁸⁹ Jackson talks about doing race in *Harlemworld* (2001).

stereotypes, are thrown out; other times, they are inverted or reworked. Sometimes they are reinforced. The performance of the especulador is interesting to consider in terms of wealth, which points to relevant economic causes, and revelry, which focuses on situations where the especulador acts.

Wealth

The especulador wears gold chains and rings, Tommy Hilfiger fashions, Nike sneakers, and Versace shades. He may drive a nice car with a fan and a SONY radio. He is quick to flaunt his privilege, his access to these things and experiences that many only dream of. This lifestyle is possible for popular musicians or sports stars that, as stated above, travel abroad, negotiate for themselves lucrative contracts, are national heroes, treasures, etc. But what about people who earn between twelve and fifteen dollars monthly at government jobs? In order to portray this image they must necessarily explore alternative avenues to material gain. Common solutions to this dilemma include careers in sports or music, jobs in tourism with access to tips, money remittances from relatives abroad, and/or negocio (illicit business in the informal economy). Negocio in particular bears witness to the tension inherent to Cuba's present economic system: in order to survive, not to mention live even remotely like tourists who are welcomed to the island now, people have to "invent" business outside of the official economy and the law (inventar, vivir del invento). People sell cigarettes, lollypops, repair tires, sew—a variety of entrepreneurial activities. The especulador performs desire and the creativity necessary to satisfy it. My madrina told me that El Médico's chart topping refrain *Hay que estar arriba de la bola* (You've got to be on the ball) struck a chord because he was talking about surviving—by one's wits, by hook or crook, the reality of many Cubans at that time. The following are examples from my field notes of what he may have meant.

Smugglin' Meat: Today for the second time a police officer arrived from Las Tunas in eastern Cuba heavy with beef to sell here in Havana. He came wearing his uniform so no one would stop him with his load—a large suitcase full of frozen carne. While the meat was cut up he talked about how folks were getting caught in the act with huge boxes of coffee, tanks of honey, etc. It was striking how he separated himself from “them”, when he was doing it too!

Yogul (Yogurt): Today I was awakened by the shuffling of chancletas up the stairs and into the kitchen. When I looked out I saw the family quickly packing the refrigerator with dozens of plastic packs of a milky substance. There was a feeling of urgency, but they were smiling, giddy with some delicious secret. I asked what was happening and they explained that they had gotten access to this yogurt (pronounced yo-gool in Cuban Spanish) at a very low price. They had borrowed a little money from me and purchased as much as they could in hopes of reselling it for a profit. This is what is called *luchando*—hustling by means that are technically illegal, but mostly devoid of a malicious, “criminal” intent.

On the flip side of *negocio*, there is another reaction to the longing for luxury on the part of Cubans. Presenting false images of affluence, or “bluffing”, is another characteristic of the *especulador*. Often those who look the part of the wealthy jet setter are actually penniless (interview 1999). This kind of fantasizing invites another comparison with hip-hop artists. Take for example the rappers who appear in their first music video wearing platinum watches and diamond necklaces, driving Mercedes Benzes and bragging about it all as if it were theirs. Most of them have rented the cars and gotten fake jewelry for the purpose of the video shoot. They have no real wealth, only the status conferred by perceived wealth. In contemporary Cuba, wealth—even this imaginary or symbolic wealth—brings status and a modicum of relief from the tension of desire. It manifests itself through a kind of (ritual) performance in which the desired object is imitated and thus made “real”. For example, there is a popular joke about *especuladores* who nurse one beer all night long at dance spaces like La Casa de la Música in order to present the image of financial means and hide actual lack thereof. *Hasta las familias especulan*—families speculate too—as photographs for weddings and quinceñeras, very

important in Cuban culture, are staged using borrowed garments, rented cars, etc. to give the impression of wealth and abundance.

The *especulador* definitely echoes the *negros curros* discussed by Ortiz. He writes that their self-presentation, or performance—the ostentatious clothing, big jewelry, fancy hairstyles, and grandiloquent jive talk—aimed to express their difference from and superiority to the average, enslaved, non-cosmopolitan Afrocuban person in their community. The *curros* used pants that fit loosely through the leg, coming to a point at the ankles and shirts with ruffled sleeves and collars. They also used colorful bandanas around their neck, waist, in pockets, in hand, as well as wrapped around large straw hats (Ortiz 1995b: 49). Pointed-toe, backless shoes called *chancletas* were part of the *curro* style too. Ortiz emphasizes that they used the Spanish (Andalusian) fashions according to African aesthetic principles (Ibid.: 41). This is an example of transculturation and resistance in a society that was anti-color and anti-Africa.

As far as jewelry, the *curros* were known for large hoop earrings of gold, which were often fake. This detail—which highlights the importance of appearance over reality—smacks also of today's *especulador*. The *curros* wore braided hair like blacks in many parts of the world; but in the context of Cuban society of the time they used the style in a scandalous, exhibitionist way (Ibid.: 55). Braids have come back again in Cuba. Language-wise, the *curros* had a unique way of speaking, at once high sounding in the way of Spanish poets, incorporating also a special jive all their own, unintelligible to many (Ibid.: 83). They spoke with “a unique inflection in their voice, an overblown speech, a particular language, at once physical and nonsensical (Ibid.)”. Their way of speaking was accompanied by emphatic, expressive gestures and intended to communicate their status as *curros*. Ortiz notes too that there was an “insolent and challenging” aspect in the *curros*' speech. “Everything about the *curro* was public and exhibitionist” (Ortiz 1995b: 5). The *curro* moved by “individual initiative and aims” (Ibid.: 6). The *curros* were cosmopolitan, reflecting influences from Spain, Africa, and

the New World in their unique way of being. Many of the synonyms for curro during that time describe today's especulador.

mojo: a person who in their actions and dress takes liberties, luxurious, decked out

currutaco: very affected in one's rigorous use of fashion

taco: sharp dresser, affected in one's dress

They are both exhibitionists. At one of the high energy points in his song "De la Habana" (From Havana) in which he addresses los especuladores, Paulito sings,

"¡levanten la mano pa' que te vean!" put your hands in the air so they can see you!

Through their ostentation the negros curros at once expressed their condition as freemen, a certain proximity to the dominant white culture, and specific ties to Andalusia (Ibid.:

51). Curro also means 'from Andalusia' and most of them came to Havana from there, specifically the city of Seville, the economic and naval capital of the Spanish empire

(Ibid.: 14, 52). Both the negro curro and the especulador need proper recognition

(*necesitan no ser confundidos por nadie*) and are strongly tied to La Habana, Cuba's metropolitan center (Ibid.).

The performative nature or strategy of these characters was so strong that a verb and related adjective form manifested: *acurrar*, *acurrado* (Ibid.: 54), just as in the case of the especulador. Victor Turner's thoughts about performing the self politically apply to both characters: "Self is presented through the performance of roles, and through declaring to a given public that one has undergone a transformation of state and status, been saved or damned, elevated or released" (Turner 1986: 81). The notions of freedom and oppositionality (even despite complicity) link curros and especuladores to the maroon.

The performance of marginal male identity that the *especulador* exemplifies finds parallels in other parts of the African Diaspora. The *sapeurs* and *sportifs* of the two Congos, *freaky hype types* of Jamaica (Hope 2006: 34-5), Harlem *zoot suiters* (Hurst 1985), and *hyphy boys* in Oakland, California are similar characters. In each case, appearance (clothing, accessories, etc.), performance, and music are key in achieving some kind of transformation: they “envelop and develop the body, draw the cultural contours of the social group, and bring out a plurality of egotistical identities”, remaining always, however, “a response, a way for this ‘sacrificed’ youth to adjust to changing realities over which they have virtually no control” (Gondola 1999: 48). All of these characters are associated with, shaped by specific sounds (music styles/subcultures) in particular spaces—at public dances, dollar only clubs, *inna di dancehall*, etc.

One cousin of the *especulador* is the *sapeur* from the Congo. In this phenomenon young Congolese men use fashion (*sape*) to “tamper” (Jackson 2001) with their identity, to “blur social lines and make class values and social status illegible” (Gondola 1999: 31). *Sapeurs* emerged in the early years of the colonial era and became visible during the war years, linked to the dawn of bar-like dancehalls in Brazzaville and Kinshasa (Gondola 1999: 26). According to Gondola, the *sapeur* is “an illusionist...concealing social failure and transforming it into apparent victory” (Ibid.) through the use of fashion and performance. Like the *especulador*, the *sapeur* is “artificial” (31). He discovers himself as a being and a social actor through the identity that appearances obtain for him. Interestingly Gondola notes that, beyond actual clothes, “a spoken (*even sung or danced*) clothing [performance] makes the *sapeur* the actor and conjuror” of his assumed identity (Gondola 1999: 25, emphasis mine).

For sapeurs themselves: “Sape is a value. It means rediscovering something that’s ours. Sape reflects us...it makes us” (32). These perspectives mirror views about the especulador in Havana—considered “artificial” and “*fantasioso*” but also as a genuine way of expressing one’s *self* (su propio yo). Fantasy and artificiality are strategies to construct and transform identities. Both the especulador and the sapeur are “hybrid models of manhood that originated in the hedonistic culture of *l’ambiance* [*la farándula* or nightlife] located in the bar and expressed by...music” (Pype 2007: 265).

Also in the Congo, *sportifs* (fighting boys) “use their body to become someone” (Pype 2007: 251) in a different way. Rather than fashion, sportifs use physical fitness and intimidating body language to transform themselves socially. By training martial arts, competing in tournament-like daytime matches, and nighttime brawls that often end in serious injury or even death, sportifs barter “bodily strength for social prestige” (Ibid.: 258). They are linked to music because important musicians hire them as bodyguards. Their way of posturing and walking has been caricatured in Congolese popular dance.

In Oakland, California so called *hyphy boys* use erratic behavior and aggressive body language to give the impression of craziness. They have converted the clothing of poor ghetto youth into a fashion statement, respected by those who use it and feared by those outside of the style (like the elderly or bourgeois). They wear oversized white T-shirts, jeans, and dreadlocks in their hair. They are associated with hip-hop musicians from the San Francisco Bay Area like E 40, Mr. Fabulous, Eazy A Ski, etc. Hyphy boys are known to perform a dance —called “goin’ dumb” or “gettin’ hyphy”—in which they shake their dreadlocks, jump, twist, and contort their visage into what they call the “thizz face”. By donning the oversize white T-shirt, the dreads, etc. black men in Oakland

disappear into this hyphy identity, celebrating their marginality within the city, and evading individual responsibility for any rumpus they might kick up there.

Across the Diaspora we see people using “technologies of the self” (Pype 2007: 260-1), including dress/fashion, dance, gesture, athletic training, speech, violence, and even magic, to tamper with identity. One troubling fact of these characters and strategies is that they seem to value economic strength above all else. This echoes W.E.B. DuBois’ warning to African Americans in the aftermath of slavery and Reconstruction not to follow mainstream America in its thirst for wealth at the sacrifice of goodness (DuBois 1994: 47-55). The performative strategies used by marginalized peoples to access wealth and status and adjust their identities in relation to European controlled resources and values evoke again the maroon aesthetic and the concept of “opposition”; that is, resistance from within a system, using tools and logic borrowed from the system. The strategies chosen mark the marginal position of these people in society, and also their boundedness within it. Each character is tied to specific spaces, each with their own social dynamics.

Revelry

In his smash hit song “De La Habana”, timba singer Paulito F.G. describes the especulador. According to him especuladores are: “la gente que te regala una sonrisa por la mañana, y después salen a formar lo suyo de madrugada, porque les gusta la salsa” (the ones who give you a smile in the morning and are gone in the wee hours of the night to do their thing, because they love salsa). As the song ends, the chorus asks “¿Dónde están los especuladores?” (Where are the speculators?) and Paulito exhorts them to wave their hands in the air, adding that Havana is the place for the most tremendous “especulación”. The image in Paulito’s song is one of a party-loving, self-aware individual, interested in

enjoying life and being recognized. Conspicuous wealth/consumption is an important part of the image. The nightclubs, dance halls, bars, and busy streets of Havana are ideal places to assert one's status—especular—and often individuals will go out to do just that.

As Paulito sings the audience takes in his cool, cocky persona, effected by talent and also by wealth (clothes, jewelry, etc.). As they dance, many are inspired to emulate him without the means to do so. The especulador has developed as an entity/identity that expresses this desire. He is both real and imagined, as those that are emulated and those who emulate (through negocio or bluffing) are both especuladores. This character may be a symbolic representation of how Cubans perceive themselves in the encounter with the capitalist ethic, and North American and Western European tourism. It makes sense that musicians—who are perhaps most in touch with these intruders—should be mediators in this relationship.

Manolín, El Médico de la Salsa, one of the brightest and most charismatic stars of the height of the timba movement is also the picture of the especulador. He was always smartly dressed, often in a dapper suit with a hat, elegant and slightly gangsterish. There was the air of a trickster about him. The fact that he was no great vocalist technically made him rely on storytelling and pithy, rhythmic phrases that express everyday life and make people dance. His background as a gynecology student who turned to music out of dissatisfaction with his life possibilities reflects the frustration of an entire generation of AfroCubans. Manolín came out in 1992 and by 1994 there were riots in the streets of the black neighborhood of Los Sitios in Havana. In this way Manolín was “a character perfectly tuned to the new social reality of the special period” (Perna 2005: 67).

As the life of ordinary Cubans receded to 4th World levels, the stars of salsa projected a representation of success and sophistication, an image of escapism and self-empowerment, which, in the context of the decline of the economic role of the state, acquired obvious political meanings (Ibid.: 66).

In 1996 a doctor earned \$15 per month, while Manolín earned \$9,200. His success seemed to represent the triumph of materialism and individualism over revolutionary moral values. According to Manolín, “people started associating money with me” (Cantor 1998). Manolín and bands like La Charanga Habanera became symbols of the new market-adjusted pop artist, articulating into a modern, cosmopolitan image the desires and aspirations of their young, black barrio audiences (Op. cit.: 73). Like Manolín, the *especulador* speaks and performs in the language of the black barrio; in Manolín’s words, with a little *guapería*⁹⁰, that Afrocuban feel.

He became so popular that by the time of my interviews (roughly ten years after his start and two years after his leaving the country) people talked about their experiences dancing to El Médico in a rapturous way. Many described those times at La Tropical and the public dances as the best moments in their lives. “Todo lo que hizo pegó,” everything he did was a hit (interview with Rolando Zaldívar 2003). His duels with archrival and friend Paulito F.G. are the stuff of legend⁹¹. The choruses would go on and on, there was always another humorous, funky phrase to inspire the massive crowd to dance. Some regretted never seeing El Médico at El Palacio de la Salsa or La Casa de Música, because they couldn’t afford it, while others talked about the chic, exclusive crowd, and people’s desperation to enter. When Manolín defected in 2001 he left a mark in the musical history of the island (see Figs. 9.1, 9.2).

This comparison of Manolín, El Médico de la Salsa, with the *especulador* shows how the *especulador* expresses a desire for a quality of life that is difficult, if not impossible, for most Cubans to achieve in contemporary Cuba. There is a joyous abandonment of socialist values in favor of financial gain, and the individual is placed above the collective. Due to the pressure that a character like the *especulador* exerts

⁹⁰ This means thuggery. It has a definite connotation here of black gangsterism and performance (i.e. gestures, speech, actions like crimes, or rumba) associated the lower class.

⁹¹ These impromptu showdowns echoed verbal duels from rumba columbia, another Cuban genre called punto guajiro, hip-hop “battles”, dancehall reggae “sound clashes”, and a modality of Brazilian samba called “partido alto”.

against the socialist structure of the country, he is politically charged. Musicians were allowed to negotiate their own contracts for foreign tours and with recording labels (Decree-Law no. 140, 13 Aug. 1993, Resolution of the Ministry of Culture no. 61, 4 Nov. 1993). Touring became relatively easy and encouraged, while entrance fees to clubs could be charged according to demand (the cover to see Manolín and Paulito soaring to \$30).

At the same time we should not imagine that timba artists were total free agents. Historical features, musical vitality, and business politics occasioned timba's boom (Roy 2002: 9). Timberos were enmeshed in state systems that organized labor, including music. For example in 1989, Artex was created as a state owned agency for managing foreign engagements by Cuban artists, replacing older, less efficient institutions with similar functions. Musicians worked as members of various agencies (empresas) with which Artex coordinated. Recording brought fame, but money was earned through live shows. Popularity was won through radio play, which exposed artists to censorship (Perna 2005: 91)⁹², as certain songs could be excluded.

Paulito F.G. suggests that the timba movement lost state support, and in fact incurred some hostility, because of the wealth and love of wealth/especulación that was being generated by it. Tension developed because the creation of wealth helped support the Revolution but at the same time upset the ideal of economic equality. According to Paulito:

There was a time during the special period when we [los timberos] were an important economic help for the Revolution, but later this changed—precisely because of the great demand we had created—this became something that was frowned upon in a society like this one (interview with Paulito F.G. 2003).

⁹²Other ways to censor musicians included controlling access to state managed clubs, and restricting movement through visas and travel permits (Ishikama 2001, timba.com).

Timba focused world attention on Cuban music while also highlighting uncomfortable realities (see chapter three). As he explained this, Paulito's cell phone rang—a sign of difference in 2003 (though no longer), like the curros' loud chancletas or flaming pañuelos in the colonial era. Many young people aspire to at least some qualities of the especulador. Many of these qualities are defined and communicated through music and its performance. Identity is formed and reconfigured “by acting on the body through the specific mechanisms of identification and recognition produced in the intimate interaction of performer and crowd” (Gilroy 1993: 90). There are socioeconomic realities embedded in the especulador.

¿Dónde están los especuladores?

I asked Paulito to explain what he meant to say in his song “De La Habana”:

PFG: To me la especulación de La Habana is a song that denotes a nostalgia that Cubans outside Cuba feel, the sense of talking about my city in a warm, tender way... You know the world is full of Cubans and they're all asking 'How's Havana?' But why do I use the term especuladores? It's that everywhere I go...there is always some speculation as to what's happening in Havana. People speculate and make up things that aren't true.

According to him his song has nothing to do with our discussion of the especulador so far. He claims that people misinterpret his lyrics when they envision and embody the especulador as discussed in this essay. However, even if Paulito's intention is not to invoke this character, the public's interpretation is just as important. The very word especulador is fraught with meaning. At the start of the Revolution, those too slow in embracing necessary sacrifices (i.e. surrendering businesses, properties, etc.) were called especuladores. Thus at a time of economic transition and social tension the term especulador puns on itself, and re-stages the performance of el negro curro. In many

registers of language—ranging from speech and appearance to action—the *especulador* expresses Afro-Cuban experience in contemporary Cuba.

Conclusion

Drawing on the African-Caribbean musical concepts of collective participation and call and response, *timba*, articulates in its sound tensions in the society during the special period. In this context the *especulador* has embodied the ideals of some Cubans in the form of a cultural type or performance. His image—flashy dress, bluffing, big spending, and *machismo*—is significant in terms of responses by Cubans to the current national situation. Just as musicians use already popular slang to make catchy refrains, but also create new slang that becomes accepted and widely used, even in nonmusical settings, ways of being like those of the *especulador* can be developed through musical performance. By performance I do not mean the simple “playing” of music. Rather I invoke it as “a means by which people reflect on their current conditions, define and/or reinvent themselves and their social world, and either reinforce, resist, or subvert prevailing social orders” (Drewal 1991). Cubans (especially Afro-Cubans) seem to be defining desire, positioning themselves in relation to (systems of) wealth, and questioning the social order that denies it to them. And while some would say “*timba* has nothing to do with politics” (interview with *La Charanga Forever* 1999), a politicized reading of *timba* and the *especulador* deserves consideration, because of the Cuban situation that has spawned it, which is undeniably charged with politics.

In the case of the *especulador* musical and nonmusical performance intertwine. At concerts musicians sing about wealth and display it to their audiences; the audiences “wear” their ideas of wealth and desire, represented by fashion, gesture, etc. The

performative dialectic between reality and illusion symbolizes the Afrocuban struggle for equality and opportunity yet to be wholly fulfilled. Away from musical contexts people continue to perform these interpretations, often using the language (speech, dress, gesture, etc.) developed in the nightclub in dialogue with musicians. By reading timba lyrics, considering its sound and performance, and analyzing the self-performance of individuals influenced by it—in both musical and nonmusical contexts—we can learn about Cubans’ reactions to the social, political, economic moment in which they are living.

Like the *especulador*, the *sapeur*, the *sportif*, and the *hyphy boys* are associated primarily with masculinity (Gondola 1999: 28; Pype 2007: 251). However, each exists within wider social contexts that, of course, include women. The *mujer chismosa* (gossip), the *jinetera* (hustler/prostitute), and the *santera* are examples from Havana, while *higglers* (entrepreneur saleswomen) and *skettels* (harlots) are female characters from Kingston, Jamaica (Hope 2006). Pype calls on scholars to locate these kinds of performative characters in relationship to others within their respective contexts. Doing so with specific attention to women is an exciting area for new research. How, for example, do women perform the *especulador* differently if at all? What other characters or performances do women inhabit or “conjure”?

For Afrocubans the character of the *especulador* and the strategy of *especulación* are ways to escape perceived inferiority and unattractiveness. In the maroon analogy we have been developing, they constitute more weapons/tools with which to fashion the self, and another instance of complicit contestation. In this complicity their emphasis on *self-determination* places the maroons/*especuladores* in conflict with would-be allies—for

example, allying themselves to masters against fugitive slaves in the colonial era, or embracing capitalist hedonism in the midst of socialist Revolution. In a historical context of hostility and marginalization, what seem like unfortunate choices or stances also demonstrate the supreme importance of self-determination, above all else, within the maroon aesthetic of Afro Cuba and timba.



Fig. 5.1 Paulito F.G.



Fig. 5.2 La Especulación de La Habana



Fig. 5.3 Especuladores at La Casa de la Música in Centro Habana

Chapter 6

The Joy Train: Dance Spaces in Havana



Fig. 6.0 Alegría/Joy

Chapter 6

The Joy Train: Dance Spaces in Havana

“Nowadays the transformation of our customs, easy eroticism and the growing mechanization of life have calmed the frenzy for dance in Cuba; but still dance continues to be the main and most enthusiastic pastime of the Cuban people, its most genuine product, its most universal export.”

—Fernando Ortiz

In this epigraph, published in 1951, a moment of economic ascent for Cuba’s elite, technological advance and increased presence of U.S. tourism Fernando Ortiz looks toward a past that he perceives as healthier because the true Cuban values were still alive, not yet compromised to the detriment of Cuban culture; and describes a present and near future where the importance of dance among the Cubans would decrease due to the accelerated pace and changed customs of modern life (Ortiz 1951: 188). Whether or not he was correct in these visions, Ortiz was right on in affirming the central place of dance among Cubans. By this time Afrocubans were already very limited in terms of spaces in which to express their cultural perspective. Half a century after Ortiz’ writing, dance in Cuba continues to be a great deal more than a pastime or simple diversion, but rather a national compulsion, part of the cubanness of faith, hope, and love that he calls *cubanía* (Suárez 1996). This chapter continues to examine spaces where timba is the medium for the performance of identities. I look specifically at public dances in contrast to events at La Tropical and La Casa de la Música. Each represents a space with different

characteristics; while all share timba music as the medium for social (inter)action. Building on Chapters one through five we approach these phenomena as important environments for negotiating space, in the ongoing evolution of Afrocuban identity and Cubanness (including sovereignty and economic solvency), through performance. The free open-air public dance, or *baile público*, is signaled as one of the most dynamic social settings due to the diversity of the people present and the power of their unified action through music and dance. I suggest that—in the absence of cabildos, societies, etc.—the public dances take on some of their functions as black social spaces. Thus they are important for the continued development of Cuban society and culture at large.

In his book *Gallos y toros en Cuba*, about the significance of cockfights and bullfights in Cuban identity formation, historian Pablo Riaño considers “la formación de la cubanidad” (the making of cubanness) taking into account economic and political factors as well as the role of cultural expressions in the process (Riaño 2002: 12). Riaño’s understanding of cockfights and bullfights as “everyday play and spectacle” (performance) and as “espacios de sociabilidad” (social or performance *spaces*), crucibles for social interaction, is useful in considering the significance of dance spaces in Cuba. He talks about how the social dynamics of these spaces—*what* took place, *who* interacted and *how*—determined the elevation and nature of one or various national cultures (Ibid.). He introduces the idea that the struggle to determine how cockfights and bullfights fit into national culture at the turn of the 20th century affected definitively practices in the use of public spaces in Cuba. Always at issue: Who are the Cuban people? What are their traditions? To what do they aspire in their diversity (Ibid.: 76)? Today, at the start of a new century, public spaces are still important in the process of creating Cuban identity and culture. With Riaño in mind, I realized that dance spaces host the performance of identity for Cuba in general and for Afro Cuba especially. Because of their particular characteristics the public dances are the black cultural spaces par excellence in contemporary Cuba.

To better understand how the dance spaces reflect and influence the daily reality of Cubans methodical observation has been conducted in various dance spaces in Havana, taking into account the location of the place, the time of the show (day or night), the crowd with relation to the capacity of the place, a characterization of the public (age, race, Cuban-foreigner) and their interaction with each other and with the orchestra. Who frequents which dance spaces and why? How is it that various successes and challenges of Cuban society are expressed in the characters and behaviors that animate these dance spaces?

Following to an extent, but not exactly, the work of Katrina Hazzard-Gordon in *Jookin'*, I observed dance spaces in Havana from two basic groups or types—juke or commercial—each with its own continuum of variations. In what Hazzard-Gordon calls the “juke continuum” (1990: x) I frequented public outdoor dances (bailes públicos), rumbas de solar, toques de santo, and pun pun. The jook continuum refers to institutions that appear exclusively in the black community and essentially underground, and thus require practically no assistance from public officials in order to function (Ibid.). They can be linked in form and function directly to Africa, employing group participation, call and response, and the hot circle as performative tools. From the juke continuum I will discuss only the public dance because our focus is on timba music.

Also I observed spaces that belong to what Hazzard-Gordon calls “the commercial urban complex”, which require official sanction and have no direct precursors in the African past (Hazzard-Gordon 1990: x). Nightclubs, cabarets, discotechs, and official rumbas are part of this group. I focused on clubs like La Casa de la Música⁹³ where timba music was the main attraction in the form of live bands and recorded music played by deejays. These spaces show social hierarchy in a way related to, yet different from, public dances. Finally, due to its particular characteristics as a

⁹³ Very similar to other clubs like La Cecilia, El Diablo Tun Tun, Café Mi Habana, etc.

social and musical space La Tropical sits in between the public dance and the dollar only club. Its price is intermediate between the free public dances and the expensive dollar lonely clubs. Also its history is of intermediate length—shorter than that of public dances and longer than recently developed dollarized venues. La Tropical has been observed as well.

Throughout Cuba's history music, dance, and song have been common and of great importance. The *areítos* of the native populations of Cuba (soon eradicated by the conquering Spaniards) are a precursor of the public dances of today. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas writes that, "they loved their dances, to the rhythm of songs...their beat, in their voices and in their steps, was a sight to see, because they brought together three or four hundred men [and women]..." (Esquenazi Pérez 2001: 27-28). Certainly the music and performance practices (both sacred and secular) brought by enslaved Africans to Cuba marked the incipient tradition of gathering to act collectively through music, song, and dance on the island. Ortiz calls the music of the Africans brought to Cuba a music "of construction not decoration", of action not just distraction (Ortiz 1993b: 29). Cabildo processions on the Day of the Three Kings (January 6) served as a pressure valve for the economic-social system of Cuba based on slavery. They provided brief respite for the sufferers and, in doing so, reduced the threat of rebellion and improved moral, thereby preserving the system for its masters (Ibid.: 336). Of course, cabildos and their activities also provided a space where African culture could develop and flourish. Dance spaces in Cuba, especially the open-air public dances discussed here, are part of this old tradition⁹⁴.

Anthropologist and dancer Katherine Dunham describes the sociological function of various kinds of group dances in Haiti (including among others Mardi Gras, Carnival,

⁹⁴ The diverse Spanish cultures present on the Island (already influenced by the African culture of the Moors) offered dance and song traditions such as *folías*, *el villano* (the rogue) and others that mixed with elements of indigenous and African culture to create respectively dance-music complexes such as the *zapateo* of the guajiros or country people (Esquenazi Pérez 2001: 30) and the urban rumba (Ortiz 1950: 8).

elite clubs, and peasant dances). A major function of these dances was “social cohesion and solidarity” (Dunham 1983: 45); releasing from tension a people living under rigid economic, political, and social pressures for the benefit of society as a whole. She also notes the development of dance technique as an instrument of sexual attraction; gratification of exhibitionist tendencies through the performance-audience relationship; and the development of artistic values and appreciation. These functions are true of contemporary dance spaces in Cuba. In the dance spaces of Cuba vestiges of racism—which persist in spite of progress—are worked out and performed as people choose where to dance. Frustrations about living conditions in contemporary Cuba are relieved through the energy of the dance and the sociability of the dance space. Ways of being (Afro) Cuban are exhibited and negotiated.

Public Dances

In my country, the United States, free public dances like those Cuba in which first-rate acts comparable to Los Van Van or Paulito F.G. perform are a great deal less frequent. Our North American way of life is oriented to the profit motive and not to the promotion of culture in and of itself, and so permits limited space for these types of events. Nevertheless, when they happen, everybody takes part (imagine Sting or Earth, Wind and Fire in Central Park) with little sense of taboo or disdain from certain sectors of the society (for example the privileged or wealthy that could easily pay for the same concert). Not too many people say “Oh no, I don’t go to those things!”

On the contrary, in Cuba (my observations are mostly from Havana) this opinion is heard quite often. Many say they would never attend a public dance at La Piragua (a plaza in El Vedado on the Malecón⁹⁵ near the famous National Hotel), the Plaza of the Revolution, or especially at Plaza Roja in 10 de Octubre, in order to avoid the people that

⁹⁵ Havana’s oceanfront promenade (See Fig. 2.9) .

go there and the problems they create. People's opinions about timba and places where it is performed (including bailes públicos, clubs, and "intermediate spaces") are tied to ideas of black inferiority and social stratification. They reveal that racism and a color-based hierarchy of wealth, opportunity, and status persists. What can be done, especially through the popular music and public dances themselves, to improve the situation? As black cultural spaces what function do these dances exercise for the benefit of Cuban society at large?

Pedro Sarduy writes that in the free open-air dances, the national passion for dance has few limits (Sarduy 2001: 171). He suggests that in the baile público something happens that nurtures the collective soul of Cuba. Eugene Banks sees them functioning as "an exercise in massively parallel computation, many minds, each solving its own bit of an otherwise unsolvable problem" (Robinson 2004: 6-7) through music and movement. Specific responses to the realities of daily life are improvised in a web of complex relationships with infinite possibilities—critiquing, creating, embracing through dance. Of course, Benítez-Rojo has the baile público in mind when he calls the Caribbean itself a feedback machine centered on performance in the public domain (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 11). As part of the process of truly integrating all, and as an indicator of its progress, dance spaces are important. Fidel explained with respect to practices instilled socially over generations, as in the case of racism, that true change couldn't come through laws, but only through education and persuasion (Castro 1983: 395-397). The real state of the situation is perceived through people's behavior: where and with whom they decide spend their free time. With whom they choose to *dance*.

In the wake of the 1959 revolution *círculos sociales* (recreation centers) such as those named for Patrice Lumumba and Cristino Naranjo opened, replacing the old segregated societies, for all to dance together. As Dunham noted for Haiti, dance spaces offer the opportunity for diverse segments of the population, with differences of history, educational level, complexion, etc. to interact with one another in peace, in situations not

regulated by laws. Nevertheless there were moments in which the dance spaces or recreational centers were not considered important in comparison to the other priorities of the new revolutionary society (like literacy, housing, and national security). Many of them were closed by the State at various times: for example El Salón Rosado de la Tropical was closed for many years between the end of the 1960s and the 1980s.

Cuba's socioeconomic crisis beginning at the start of the 1990s and the measures taken in response to the difficult situation since then, all together known as the special period (which as yet has not ended), has boosted emphasis on music and dance as economic products for trade (see chapter four). Cabaret shows like Tropicana continue to entertain foreigners as they have for decades in Havana, as do performances by small bands and roving minstrels. In addition, recording facilities like Abdala Studios (built in 1998) with state of the art technology have been developed, along with record companies like Cubarte and Caribe Music, and ministries have been formed to better administer the production and diffusion of popular music both traditional (son, bolero, guaracha, etc.) and contemporary (salsa/timba, hip-hop, rock, and reggaetón).

Also, new kinds of venues for music consumption, especially by tourists, were created: El Palacio de la Salsa, La Cecilia, and La Casa de la Música are examples. Nevertheless, though there has been a new focus on promoting music for the masses (especially the masses of tourists), at same time, differences in income, access to U.S. currency, and other side effects of the responses to the economic crisis have complicated the matter and made attitudes from yesterday resurface. Related to this, there has been a negative effect on the perception of La Tropical, and especially the free public dances held at places like La Piragua, Plaza Roja of 10 de Octubre, and La Plaza de la Revolución. The perception is, then, that opportunities for recreation and amusement for young people have decreased.

Through a survey that I distributed among people in Havana and interviews that I conducted I learned that a preference exists for dollarized dance spaces like La Casa de la

Música (even though respondents had rarely or never gone there); and, complementarily, a strong contempt exists for the public dances (at times even when they have never attended one of these either). The public dance is considered a space of conflict, “massive bad taste” (*chusmería masiva*) and “maximum vulgarity”, mobs of drunks, blacks, and noisy music; “a place where you have to watch out” (*de cuidado*). One young-lady from the Superior Institute of Art said, “People who are educated or have a certain intellectual level don’t go because they know that the worst of the worst of the worst go to these events.”

In the majority of the encounters that I have had people think that La Casa de la Música, etc. are pleasant places to dance and enjoy popular Cuban music, due to the ample, air conditioned space and the tranquility they provide. Many persons for lack of resources had never been in the dollar dance spaces and refuse to go to public dances. It is an economic problem that impedes the entrance in the dollar locales (although some consider that La Casa de la Música is of “thinly veiled bad taste” and therefore do not go), while in the case of the public dances people’s refusal to attend is due to some negative experience or the teachings of their family or of the society itself.

Only a few university students and professionals responded positively, that they see no problem in attending a public dance because, in their words, “we are young too and we must have fun”. This kind of answer turned out to be exceptional, and by my experiences in Havana I know, for example, that it is difficult to find a young lady (no matter what neighborhood she is from) that will accept an invitation to La Tropical or to a public dance; in fact with me they have become angry that I even brought it up!⁹⁶

So, where do the multitudes that populate these festivities come from? If it’s popular music, take for example Paulito F.G., Manolín, or La Charanga Habanera, then mostly blacks go to dance. This is because timba—the primary music in these spaces—is

⁹⁶ My being from the U.S. may have affected this reaction; I may have been expected to take them somewhere “better”.

very much theirs, they carry it inside like every Cuban does and more (see chapters three and four). Blacks also attend in large numbers because they lack money and cannot afford to enter other places (Sawyer 2006; interviews). Their presence in turn discourages other sectors of the society from attending.

Juan Formell founder of Los Van Van says the following with respect to perceptions of La Tropical (and implicitly public dances) and its role in Cuban culture:

It's true that today a popular dance can become a regrettable social fact, because people go with a different mentality, there is more violence and rows are formed, they throw beers and light flares and that's no longer the spirit of the public dance where one went in search of diversion, friends, and possible love connections. But the solution taken was the easiest one, not the best: to close the dance spaces. Because if in a place like La Tropical, where five thousand people fit, Orquesta Revé or Adalberto play and eight thousand show up that is not bad, and I wish so many people attended all cultural activities. What happens is that only five thousand people can enter the dance and the others who cannot have nowhere else to go and are thirsty for music, and that's where the *molote* begins, the discomfort, and the protests that there are brawls and shouting, and it all ends in the closure of the place. Imagine, in the 19th Century there was 50 dances daily although many of them were private, it's clear, and now we are struggling to have one (Padura 1997: 100).

For those who have “nowhere else to go” the reason is because they can't afford it. The majority of them are Afrocuban. Formell continues, affirming that there are many prejudices that claim that only “los aseres” and “los guaposos” (gangsters and thugs, with an implication of color) go to public dances when in reality they are an important cultural phenomenon that should be saved for the good of the nation (Ibid.). In fact, because cabildos, sociedades de color, or color-based political parties no longer exist, they represent the largest, most consistent space where Afrocubans gather.

In contrast to the negative attitudes expressed by many, I have had many positive experiences at public dances. Most often they have been peaceful gatherings of people and their music. In those moments the world seems a perfect harmony. On one occasion dancing at La Piragua with the orchestra Azucar Negra I met several very decent,

educated people, something I did not expect due to the bad reputation of public dances. They explained to me that they always go to the public dances because they are one of the delights of their country and a very good form of entertainment. The majority of the people in attendance were mulatos or black, but I also saw white folks getting down with the orchestra. The mix brought to mind Guillén's phrase "Quien no tiene de Congo tiene de Carabali": all Cubans have genetic and cultural heritage. The Afrocuban essence confounds color. Although people danced in pairs and groups of all ages, we, the youth of between 15 and 40 years of age, predominated.

The women dressed in short shorts, low riding hip hugger jeans, a *bajichupa* or another light type of blouse, licra and sometimes short dresses. The clothes were tight fitting and bright, calling attention to their movements as they danced. The men wore jeans and T-shirts, representing U.S. sports teams like the New York Yankees or brand names like Adidas. They wore camouflage, shades, ball caps, Kangol snipers, and Gilligan style *pachanguitas*. All of this shows how much Cubans enjoy dressing in the latest fashion, showing off according to their means. Jewelry—including gold chains, both fat and slim, bracelets, and rings—was used but not in excess in order to avoid the attention of any thieves. Some go very well dressed and others do not, and everyone dances regardless. People dress very comfortably to endure the heat of the music and bodies in motion, and to return home on foot. The fashion of the public dance, with its provocativeness and colors, is very sensual as are the gestures of the dancers. Here again we see the African use of Western styles, reminiscent of the *curros*. Even with the adornment, primary focus remains on music and dance.

The language of the dance is the language of the *barrio*. Phrases like *sentimiento y manana* (feeling and flavor), the terms *salvaje* (savage) and *monstruo* (friend or man); gleeful exhortations like *¡Mátame!* (Kill me!), and complaints like *¡Qué fulankere, asere!* (How terrible, man) or *estoy palmiche* (I'm broke) are used in the dance as in the neighborhood, and carry for some a stigma of being "ghetto" (*barriotero*), vulgar, and

ridiculous. We see here shades of the *negros curros* and their grandiloquent speech, sometimes encoding secret messages, always signifying Afro-Cuban identity.

Joy is created and identity negotiated inside of the public dance. This happens through the interaction of individuals and groups that comprise the public, and the interaction between the public and the musical group. The main form of expression is dance. Monetary transactions, interpersonal relationships, conversations, interactions between Cubans from diverse sectors of society are galvanized by dance. Electricity fills the air as piston-like hip movements and precise foot patterns “beat” (*machucar*) the music. Imagine the steady drop of pestles in African mortars.

The gestures of the dances are very dynamic and mark clear distinctions between men and women. Men use dance gestures taken from rumba: pulling on the legs of their pants or their crotch at certain points in the casino dance, as when male rumba *columbia* soloists display their virility and dance skills on the docks of Havana and Matanzas. When not dancing casino men usually dance behind women, thrusting the pelvis slightly forward as they follow her movement, echoing the *vacunao* gesture of sexual conquest from rumba guaguancó. Women express strong sensuality through the dance as well. When dancing casino with men, women always follow: executing the patterns and turns he draws. When the woman faces away from the man she leads the dance with the movement of her hips. Marking the basic casino step, rocking rhythmically side to side, or rolling hips in the *tembleque* men and women together exude Africa in the Caribbean. Their movements are uniquely Cuban, but also similar to those of dancers from Haiti, Brazil, Jamaica, Congo, Oakland, and other parts of the Diaspora.

Groups of friends form small circles within the mass, which itself creates a semi circle in relation to the stage where musicians perform. People dance casino in closed partner dance position, executing complex turns and foot patterns, dynamic isolations of the shoulders, torso, and hips; and just as much, if not more, people dance separate. Many ask why and lament “the end of casino”, which has resulted in a kind of rescue of

this dance form, which was probably never really in danger. The reasons why folks dance apart include 1) the long duration of many timba songs, especially live: 10, 15, 20 minutes is a long time to dance without tiring or wearing out one's choreographic imagination as leader of the dance; 2) the emotion of the various choruses causes a jolt of energy that is more easily expressed by a leap followed by a gyrating descent to the floor *en plie* than by a casino turn; 3) the sensuality and raw sexuality expressed in some songs, especially in the choruses, inspires dancers to dance close, easier when free of the formality of dancing in partner position; 4) also the great numbers of people in a limited space leads to dancing separately, alternating this with casino, which everyone still loves.

If you can dance casino "en un solo ladrillo" (in one small spot), then dancing "apart" but *pegao* (pressed together) needs half that much space. The function and great value of the public dance is as a space of catharsis and transformation where, at least for a time, life's drudgery can be forgotten, one can lose his or her head, and mount the train of happiness. In this way the baile público is related to the areítos of the old native population, the Yoruba *wemilere*, and creole rumbas in Cuba. Like those events, it represents one of the few spaces for the cultural expression and identity formation of marginalized peoples.

Males express sensuality and machismo through dance and the force with which they care for their companions, alert to the approach of other men, etc. If alone or in all-male groups, their maleness is proven by their confidence and charisma in attracting women. Gestures of protection like blocking or covering the woman are common. Similarly, there are many ways of calling a woman's attention and beckoning her to come near. Women's movements attract attention, but they do not accept the overtures of just any man. When an unwanted suitor approaches or beckons to her, her body language responds, often aggressively, "what are you calling me for?" and states "I am not interested!" (when they do not ignore totally). Sometimes men grab women by the arm

or touch them with sensual flirtatiousness, but if the lady is not amused or if her boyfriend is coming up behind her a fight could break out.

A bottle of rum sells for 30 pesos (moneda nacional, Cuban money), half a bottle for 20. When the dance gets hot and people thirsty, the price rises to 40 pesos for a bottle. The snacks for sale are simple and do not vary much: plantain chips, pork sandwiches, roasted peanuts, cookies, gum and suckers, as well as flavored sugar water, usually cola, orange, melon or pineapple. When my friends and I go to dances we usually eat before hand at home and bring our own rum or beer from some nearby bar, in order to economize. Only at the end of the night might we consider purchasing *pan con timba* or pizza from a vendor. The sale of these items in the public dance has no air of intrigue, but rather one of legitimate business, maybe due to the anonymity afforded by the great mass of people who attend the public dance. There is much humanity, an endless sea of smiling faces, black and white, mulato, jabao, moro, chino...all of Cuba is present.

There were also some completely drunk people, but they meant no harm, they only wanted to dance in their extravagant way. One had to be careful moving through the crowd because a misstep could knock over a bottle of rum or smudge a new pair of sneakers enraging the offended party, but usually with a “permiso” (excuse me) or a “discúlpame, brother” everything was resolved. Respect and the desire to enjoy the evening and the music ruled in all and at the end of the night I walked home very content, smiling and singing. On some other occasions there has been violence, usually nothing too bad, but yes fights have started and have led to stabbings. These are facts that reinforce negative stereotypes about the public dance.

I asked Mayito Rivera, singer for Los Van Van, about violence and the baile público and he told me it must have to do with the heat of the Caribbean and the crowded dance spaces, and with the very temperament of Cuban people. He also said that those things happen everywhere (very true), and that if the public dance is maintained these incidents will be difficult to avoid. Others have told me that problems are due to the

excessive presence of alcohol and drunkenness; that in other eras the problems were less because people enjoyed soft drinks in the dances. Refresco is still present, but rum and beer are more popular, as sold at stores or by individuals that do so illegally. I have never seen the sale of drugs like marijuana or cocaine in the public dances. Also, the police presence is limited mostly to the periphery of the dance. They are there to make sure the dance is not used as a place to avenge vendettas, not to bother the dancers or molest the vendors of food and drink.

Referencing specifically the Carnival of Baranquilla in his native Colombia, the journalist César Pagano speaks for all the Caribbean and their popular demonstrations of music and dance when he says that in these spaces, “people commit with greater impunity the capital sins, short of murder, and surely this collective therapy, this essential sudden attack of liberty that temporarily makes rich and poor equals, reduces the causes of suicidal and homicidal violence” (Pagano 1984). Nevertheless we note a demarcation of space that reveals divisions between different sectors of society that attend the public dance. This division can be perceived also in other dance spaces we will look at later.

Caribbean dance scholar Rex Nettleford discusses music and dance in relation to what he calls “the battle for space” in the context of the Caribbean region, the battle for survival, progress, self determination, integration of the nation, and social justice (Nettleford 1993: 86). The way space is occupied in the public dances of Havana reflects the battle for space within a specific Caribbean society. Cuba is distinguished by its massive efforts to repair the damage of slavery and colonialism. Still, Cuban society is marked by the history of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism. Afrocubans struggle for space within Cuban society, while Caribbean nations like Cuba demand space among the planners of the IMF and World Bank. In the baile público music and dance combine to focus “creative imagination [as an] *invaluable source of energy in the continuing battle for space*” (Ibid. emphasis mine).

Right up close to the stage, in the heart of the music where things are loud and most crowded, in what is called *el molote* (the pit) we find dancers from the marginal areas of Havana, the ones who at another time would be found at La Tropical or La Plaza de la Revolución dancing with their favorite band, which they follow everywhere. Sometimes they come from far away (for example from Mantilla on the outskirts of the city all the way to El Vedado near the center) to dance with a good orchestra. The molote harkens back to the Day of the Three Kings celebrations in the streets of colonial Havana when processions would stop and form circles, which they filled with powerful drumming and expressive dancing (Brown 2003: 48). These “periodic outbreaks” of African style masquerade, dance, song, and drum rhythms are manifest today, extended at the heart of the baile público.

Surrounding this group (behind and on the sides) are those music lovers thirsty for the chance to dance but unwilling to get caught up in el molote. Often they have decided to attend the dance because it is taking place very near their home, like in the case of many of my friends from El Vedado who danced at La Piragua near the Malecón. They would be much less likely to go across town (to 10 de Octubre, for example). A young lady special education teacher and nursing student dancing in this area said: “I might not go into el molote, but I do go to the dances, how could I not go!?” Her comments corroborate and refute common perceptions of the public dance.

Behind this group, on the periphery of the space, we find people who love music but want nothing at all to do with el molote. Warnings like “Be very careful” and “Stay out of that molote” ring in their ears. When there is a concert at La Piragua these folks dance on the far sidewalk or cross the boulevard to the Malecón itself. There the music is softer, they feel safer, far from all that could happen in el molote. The farther you get from the stage and el molote the educational level and social placement of the people rises. People don’t mix haphazardly, obeying some unspoken order, and the public dance becomes a kind of demographic map of Cuban society. This map reflects the history of

marginalization that many scholars have documented (Scott 2005, Helg 1995, de la Fuente 2001, Moore 1997, Moore 1988, Martínez 2007). It also suggests the omnipresence and subversive power of performance.

Always we can find a few adventurous tourists who insert themselves throughout the dance, oblivious perhaps to where they are and protected by their status as tourists who are never to be harmed. Depending on my mood and my company I situated myself in el molote, the middle zone, or on the periphery. (We will return to this question of positioning in chapter seven.)

Peoples' presence at the public dance, their positioning within it, and their actual dancing express complex issues of desire, access, wealth, race and class positions and perceptions, which are challenges for Cuban society; and also make possible the encounter, the opportunity for dialogue and for the collective transformation necessary to make improvements in these areas. If music can be understood as a source of positive energy, power, or *aché* as many Cubans would say, then in the public dance the social order is inverted; those normally in power, at the center, are now marginalized, on the periphery dancing.

La Tropical

La Tropical beer factory was founded in 1891. In 1904 it began hosting events to promote beer sales in a type of garden called Jardines de la Tropical, designed by Catalán architects in the spirit of Gaudí with riverside pavilions that blended Moorish cupolas with tropical jungle motifs (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 152), which holds about 5,000 people. From 1904 to 1940, Spanish societies had parties there where they danced to traditional rhythms from the mother country as well as to Cuban ones like *danzón*, *habanera*, and *vals tropical* (Orejuela 1998: 10-11). By the 1920s, La Tropical was already a must-see destination for tourists interested in Cuban music. These dances maintained and reaffirmed Spanish culture on the island. They also provided a space for

cultural mixing as poor recent immigrants from Spain, who lived in marginal areas of Havana alongside blacks and mulatos, brought influences from those sectors to the Spanish dances. By the 1940s, Jardines de la Tropical became one of a limited number of social venues where almost all segments of Havana society met (Cluster and Hernández 2006: 152).

In the 1940s, the president of the beer factory decided to widen his market by catering to blacks and mulatos, who had been mostly rum drinkers due to their historical closeness to the cane fields. From then on La Tropical became a key center for Afro-Cuban popular music and dance—even called *el catedral del baile* (the Cathedral of Dance). While Spanish societies continued to use La Tropical on Sundays, Arsenio Rodríguez, Chapottín, Arcaño y sus estrellas, Sonora Matancera, Pérez Prado, Benny Moré, and many other musicians would make their reputations there during the rest of the week (Ibid.: 15). Starting in 1954, a new stage called Salón Rosado was added, used for night dances while the older Jardines de la Tropical were used for matinee functions (Ibid.: 16).

“Promoters” who belonged to Afro-Cuban societies organized most events at La Tropical. They put on dances named after popular songs (e.g. “El Cerro tiene la llave” Cerro has the key), or organized by themes (like “whites suit” or “guayabera” dances). These events tapered off throughout the 1960s as Afro-Cuban societies were dissolved (Ibid.). (In fact, the craze over Mozambique, el pilón, and other dances of the 1960s took place mostly at Salón Mambí, which opened its doors in 1962, inside cabaret Tropicana.) Events came to be organized by the National Institute of the Tourist Industry: it organized, for example, an important festival in 1961, “Papel y Tinta” (Paper and Color), with the participation of El Benny, Orquesta Aragón, and others (Ibid.: 17). In 1968, La Tropical, “like most popular venues, was shut down for economic reasons (food, drink, electricity, amplification), and also because the gatherings where young people got a bit too worked up turned into riots” (Leymarie 2002: 151). Throughout the 1970s it was

used instead for *fiestas de quince*, events organized by university organizations, etc. The closing of La Tropical, despite the opening of Salón Mambí, is signaled by many as an important cause for a malaise in Cuban dance music throughout the 1970s into the 1980s. (This in spite of the popularity of groups like Irakere and Los Van Van.)

In 1985 Salón Rosado reopens its doors. The “same blacks that had danced at La Tropical since the 1940s, those who had danced at el Mambí in the 1970s” came back now (Ibid.). Within just a few years, the upstart timba movement, with its roots in rumba and son, was cultivated at La Tropical (Ibid.: 18):

Lacking other dance spaces to go to, young people in Havana without resources to attend expensive venues that charged in dollars crowded the dance floor at Salón Rosado Benny Moré de la Tropical. Dances with Los Van Van, La Revé, Adalberto Álvarez, Irakere, NG La Banda, La Charanga Habanera, el Médico de la Salsa, Issac Delgado, Paulito F.G., and Manolito Simonet, among others, have marked a ‘golden age’ for La Tropical, indisputable incubator for this musical movement (Ibid.).

At the time of this research, the crowd and the events at La Tropical, an intermediate space, are similar to the public dance because the cover charge is very small, usually between 10 pesos (moneda nacional) to dance with a decent band, and 25 pesos to enjoy one of the country’s elite groups like Los Van Van or La Charanga Habanera, even though sometimes these shows are even free in observance of some national holiday or important celebration. Many of the same people who go and enjoy public dances also go to La Tropical. Inside La Tropical the dance space is divided in two zones: one very large with a very popular feeling (*de pueblo*) which is located on the ground level extending from the stage back to the beer vendors and restrooms, and the other, smaller and located up above, where admission is charged and refreshments purchased in dollars. Upstairs we find tourists curious to experience the famous Tropical, “thermometer of Latin music”, as well as Cubans treated to a night out by foreign friends or who have saved up to go. The effect of looking out over the main dance floor is one of connection and

disconnection. The lower portion is like the molote of the public dance; this is the place really considered the thermometer of salsa. It is said that La Tropical is a place of “possible conflicts”. Standing on the dance floor there, “Jenny” from Los Van Van⁹⁷ told me “[This] is where all those without \$25 bucks to pay a cover charge come to dance” (see Fig. 6.3). She acknowledges occasional violence, but emphasizes “people dancing, sweating, enjoying music together” as what she mostly sees. (See also David Turnley’s 2002 documentary film *La Tropical: The Best Dancehall in the World*.)

La Casa de la Música

In certain ways the dollarized clubs of today evoke the segregated atmosphere of times past. In the 1950s in Havana white and black Cubans danced in different locales, each group had its own club or society (for example Club Náutico that was for whites or the Fraternal Union which was black, Club Candado being an exception because both races attended there). At times they danced in the same place, but physically separated by a rope that divided the space. Ironically they used to greet each other warmly and pass drinks over the rope, expressing the friendships and good feelings that existed between them despite the injustice and inequalities of the society (interview with Jorge Petineaud 2003). That rope—the legacy of a terrible history—did not allow them to unite. Upon the triumph of the Revolution the ropes disappear and a fight begins against hundreds of years of learning, of hatred, misunderstanding and separation. Suddenly, there are no places where blacks cannot go; all of Cuba is for all Cubans.

In a different way the parties and concerts that take place in clubs and discos with cover charges in dollars also describe Cuban social realities. Timba and the dollarized dance spaces emerged as a convergence between the musical aspirations of the 1980s and the economic opportunities/necessities of the 1990s exploiting the fissures opened up by

⁹⁷ Yenisel “Jenny” Valdés is the first woman to sing as a permanent member of Los Van Van. Before this she was also the first woman to sing with NG La Banda.

the crisis, navigating between art music and barrio culture (see chapter three), the legal and the submerged economy (Perna 2005: 55). Timba, as well as being a “subcultural manifesto” became a “practical means to gain access, via tourist dance clubs, to a world of sophistication and plenty” (Ibid.). Instead of the heat and humidity of the outside dance, places like La Casa de la Música or Café Mi Habana provide air-conditioned cool. Matinee concerts take place from 4 pm to 8 pm, and cost between 30 and 100 pesos to attend (equal to between 1 and 5 U.S. dollars at the time of research). Night concerts cost 10 to 25 U.S. dollars, depending on the band. In both contexts all purchases of food, alcohol, cigarettes, etc. are in dollars; but prices are higher at night. For example, Cristal beer costs \$1 at matinees and \$2.50 at night. A bottle of Havana Club rum jumps from \$16 to \$40. This is where the especulador is most present. There is much room here for performative play with desire, disparity, reality and illusion.

There are also folks who have worked hard on their government job and, perhaps with a little extra hustling, saved up to celebrate an anniversary or a graduation. Others are enjoying money sent by relatives who live and work abroad and send money home to their families on the island. The dollarization of the economy has excluded Cubans from most music clubs and tied music to sex tourism and prostitution (Ibid.: 74). Because everything is purchased in dollars many of the people are tourists and the so-called *jineteros* (hustlers) that live off them. Certainly the more expensive the cover charge the less average Cubans are able to afford it, and the dancing audience is mostly comprised of middle-aged tourists and *jineteros*. This disturbs the close link between musicians and the dancing *pueblo*.

Asked about the difference between performing at Palacio de la Salsa⁹⁸ or La Tropical, Paulito F.G. responded:

⁹⁸ This club is now defunct, and has basically been replaced by la Casa de la Música, which I focus on as a dollarized dance space.

I know that my public needs me a lot...my work is fundamentally based on this public, those that follow this kind of music [timba]...the street crowd, the majority of Cubans. Many times I've been told that I am much more dynamic and "strong" in public spaces than in cabarets [like Casa de la Música, etc.] and this is true. You have before you people who have worked very hard to be able to be there, who know all your songs, and even imitate the movements of the singer and other musicians on stage; this is the public from which I was born, the one I know best. It is an open communication, more spontaneous, a more sincere surrender...(Del Pino 1997).

The characteristics of this communication—songs about neighborhood happenings, storytelling about barrio personalities, tongue twisters and snappy lines of popular slang, choruses that describe a dance step for the masses that accompanies the song, etc.—are present in exclusive spaces but with less clarity and vigor. Often Cuban women prefer not to dance with Cuban men, white women will not dance with black men, and bottom line, if you have no money to spend, you get no play. So the party never takes off like it does in public dances. In the matinees at La Casa de la Música the atmosphere is only slightly selective; the humblest elements of the city are noticeably absent, but the majority of the crowd are often Cubans, and there are many tourist couples (as opposed to single men and women) which cuts down on the *jineteo*⁹⁹. There are young ladies to dance with and a normal, healthy, and distinctly Cuban festive energy. The power of this energy depends a lot on the band, as the following anecdotes suggest.

Journal entry April 14, 2003 La Habana, Cuba
After a matinee performance at La Casa de la Música by NG La Banda

A friend from Colombia, Robert, was with me at La Casa de la Música last night. He noted that there was a certain amount of 'selectivity', that not everybody,

⁹⁹ The act of hustling (from *jinetero/a* or hustler).

especially not the most marginal elements of Havana, were there, probably because they could not pay the 100 peso cover charge (about 4 U.S. dollars). Inside, the show that NG did was marvelous, I'm never tired of hearing them. Yaritza kept asking me why they continue to play so many matinees (for such a relatively small cover charge), if it was because they are not considered good. But I don't think that is the reason. It has more to do with maintaining communication, dialogue with the dancing public.

During this same concert, after the "intelligent music, for listening" and already knee deep into the "recreational dance music" (to use the facetious terms of bandleader José Luís Cortés), some talk got started between el Tosco and a muchacha from the audience, and she sure had a lot to say! But it did not bother or distract el Tosco who introduced just then a perfect chorus, responding to her comments, and everyone broke out laughing and dancing. Some bands fail to create this energy because few will pay to dance to their music; instead they enter only to meet tourists who may have no knowledge or concern about what band is playing.

Journal entry June 23, 2003 La Habana, Cuba
After a matinee performance at La Casa de la Música by Yumurí y sus hermanos

I danced this afternoon with Yumurí. There was a lot of jinetero business going on and very little normal interaction. There were many older, white *extranjeros* (foreigners) between 40 and 65 years of age. There were also many young ladies between 18 and 30 years old who were not interested in dancing with you if you did not seem to be a pepe, a john. There were also many young Afro-Cuban males whose focus was on dancing and teaching dance to foreign women. At this Casa de la Música it's always the same guys. No one responded to the music of Yumurí. It's not terrible, but it does not excite. You can dance, but it won't drive you wild. In fact, so much was missing from the music and the entire atmosphere of jineteeo that I left early (very uncharacteristic of me).

My friend Yaritza and I went to a concert at La Casa de la Música (Centro Habana) and experienced there one of Cuban life's delights: we drank cold beer, ate fried chicken, and danced furiously all night long on the joy train—*el tren de la alegría*—with

Cuba's signature dance orchestra, Los Van Van. When we first arrived we ran into *mi socio* Pedro Fajardo, violinist of the band. We chatted a while, he introduced us to Manolo (conga drums) and Boris (keyboard), and later he invited us to join him in the VIP section where the musicians hang out before the show. We would pay him \$20 instead of \$25 at the door. There inside I met Mayito (singer), Hugo (trombone, drum machine), Cucurucho (keyboard), Cuño (güiro), and Roberto (the roady). Only Formell, who everyone said was ill, his son Samuel, and the two singers Robertón (Big Robert) and Jenny had not yet come.

Journal entry April, 2003 La Habana, Cuba
After a matinee performance at La Casa de la Música by Los Van Van

The concert was a great one. Los Van Van played two or three new numbers which were excellent, even though they did not excite the crowd as much as familiar hits. That night's version of "Soy Todo" (better known to many as "Ay Dios, ampárame") sung as always by Mayito Rivera was extra special. When he began his *soneo*—weaving his beautiful arabesque exhortations between delicious, rhythmic responses from the chorus—someone decided to go on stage and place money at his feet, and it proved contagious. One after another, crossing their arms, "presenting" the money to their head, or making the sign of the cross people gave tribute as if in ceremony. After ten minutes and maybe thirty to fifty people this stopped and Mayito belted out—with a fist full of bills—the question that always ends his song, "¿¡Somo' o no somo'!?" (Is we or is we ain't!). "¡Somo'!", we all shouted. And though I was ticked off because I'd left my camera at home, I still chuckled at peoples' jokes about what would become of that money, and just how or who had started it all off. The ritual may have become part of the show after having originated spontaneously at some public dance.

There is a magic that happens between the band and the dancing public in concerts at La Casa de la Música and similar places, but with different actors and with less intensity than in dances at La Tropical or especially public dances. Cuban writer Pedro Sarduy talks about commodified "form[s] of entertainment that [have] more to do with the visitor 'from elsewhere' than with local initiatives" (Sarduy 2001: 170) in regards to Carnival celebrations in Cuba and throughout the African Diaspora. In terms

of intense heat and interaction through music, after the public dance, and La Tropical, come La Casa de la Música and other dollarized spaces. In dollarized dance spaces, matinee concerts are better than night concerts.

The creation of new dance spaces with cover charges in dollars such as the famous Palacio de la Salsa, La Casa de la Música, La Cecilia, Café Cantante, and Café Mi Habana enjoyed by tourists and nationals with access to dollars, creates complexes of yearning for those places which are much too expensive for the majority and where the better orchestras play most frequently in order to earn money, but where the total musical event is not as good. In these dollar venues the artistic demand responds to the economic plan of the country by promoting tourism. Thus the other performances of these bands in La Tropical or La Piragua are attended by a great deal of people avid for music and motivated by the natural desire to dance. Access to dollar venues is contingent upon access to employment in the tourist sector, the emerging mixed economy of businesses, income from remittances of family members resident abroad, or *el negocio*, participation in the informal and illicit economy in order to earn dollars. The “haves” able to attend dollar venues for leisure are usually white Cubans, which dovetails with common ideas about public dances frequented by blacks and mulatos.

Once I attended a private wedding of a Spanish businessman with a Cuban bride which was held at the garden of La Cecilia, a restaurant and concert venue, and featured a live performance by one of Cuba’s most popular bands, La Charanga Habanera. It was the absolute opposite of the public dance. I have a photo with just one couple dancing to the music, totally different from La Tropical, La Piragua, or even La Casa de la Música. The flavor, the funk, *el sabor* was missing. The bandleader said of the groom who was trying to imitate his dancing, “he has a lot of heart, but no rhythm”. This is not the dancing public that best promotes the evolution of Cuban dance music, because they do not feel it or dance it. It clearly addresses the need for Cuban musicians and the nation at

large to survive by using their resources to full advantage. It shows the importance of Afro Cuba, the incompleteness of Cuba without it.

Conclusion

It seems that the real incidents of violence that happen at public dances, together with what remains of prejudice, rejection, and fear of blacks or of the so-called lower classes, make it so that many want nothing to do with them, at least admittedly. Similar to white women who say that they aren't interested in black men (never!) but who can be seen creeping in dark company, there is the sense that some won't admit they enjoy these venues. Educational campaigns on television, as used to combat drug abuse and environmental pollution, could help to rectify inappropriate behaviors and stop the all-too-common negative attitudes toward the public dance. This combined with footage from dances to be shown on television, as suggests Formell, and as was done, for example, with the end-of-the-summer dances in La Plaza de la Revolución in 2003 could help the situation.

The most beautiful thing about the public dance is that no matter how rich or poor, black or white, high or low class, whether student, scientist, jinetero or unemployed, one can enjoy Cuban music—already the product of a long history of transculturation, the continuous process that is Cuba at its best. When one does this with good intentions, always using caution, yet without the fear caused by prejudice, he or she participates positively in the continued transculturation and creation of the Cuban nation. Fidel said that part of the fight against discrimination would be “against ourselves”, countering tendencies and habits that seem natural and correct although they are not. To reject the public dances instead of seeking ways to reclaim them for the benefit of all

would be a true pity, as much for the Cuban nation and the harmony among its various sectors, particularly in these times of change and social hierarchization, as for the music itself, the prize of Cuban cultural patrimony.

Adalberto Álvarez says, “...the baile público is the thermometer of the popular dance music. So, [without it] how do we try out what we are doing with the dancer? How do you know if your music really moves people (Padura 1997: 180)?” These issues must be considered now as Cuba reinserts itself into the international music market and the question again arises, who is the music for? Clearly it is for everyone, for the whole world. But surely it must be first for the Cubans, part of the project of unifying and improving its people. With fewer activities like the public dance violence in the city may increase. Without the cathartic relief of the dance, the frustration of everyday life may be too much to bear and drive people mad. From what I have learned almost everyone concurs that there should be more public dances or affordable venues where popular bands play. As a researcher of Cuban music from the outside, and a lover of it from deep within, I hope that my observations and criteria do not offend and that a way can be sought to rescue the image of the public dance so that this space can accomplish its function, that of a crucible in the ongoing process of transculturation that is Cuban culture.

The mapping of Cuban society at the public dance places emphasis on *landscape and geographic space*, also central to the maroon aesthetic. The social pyramid is inverted within the public dance. Blacks, for a moment, become dominant dancing in the molote—rugged, difficult to access space, in the forest (Irakere), at the heart of the music. Just as blacks absconded to the hills to create self-determined communities by raiding

and improvisation—thereby preserving and extending Afro Cuba, in conflict and complicity with wider society—so do the dancers in the molote. This control is not totally fleeting, as their music and dance expressions obtain a modicum of power by influencing government policy (toward recording, tourism, touring, etc.), accessing/attracting international markets/visitors, and extending the discourse of Afro Cuba.



Fig. 6.1 La Casa de la Música in Centro Habana



Fig. 6.2 Inside La Casa de la Música in Miramar



Fig. 6.3 Salón Rosado de la Tropical (Forty-first Street in Buena Vista)

The signs reads, “No se acepta divisa”—No foreign currency accepted.



Fig. 6.4 Inside La Tropical

The dance floor is empty, closed for repair.



Fig. 6.5 End of the summer public dance at Plaza de la Revolución, Vedado



Fig. 6.6 Refreshments sold at public dances include sandwiches, snow cones, refresco, and rum

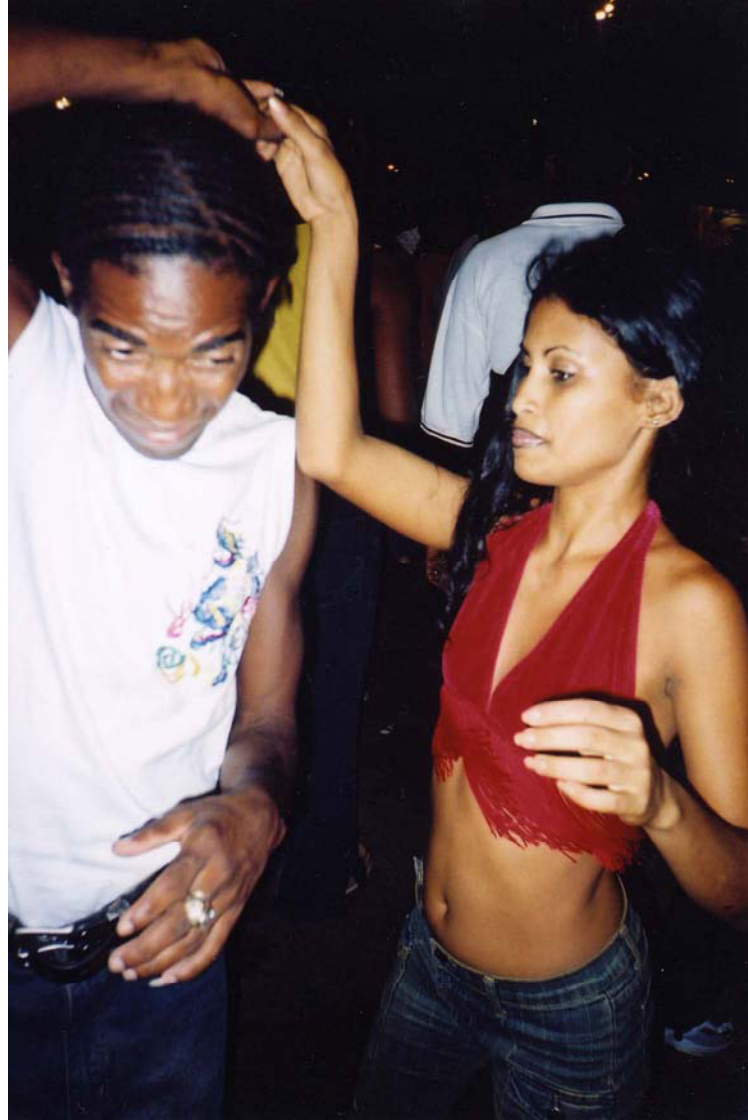


Fig. 6.7 A couple dances casino at a public dance



Fig. 6.8 The state sponsors public dances in Cuba



Fig. 6.9 La Charanga Habanera plays for a private wedding at La Cecilia nightclub, Miramar

Chapter 7

Fieldwork



Fig. 7.0 Iroko

I walk with several other people around an iroko—la ceiba or silk cotton tree—located near the main cathedral in one of the oldest parts of Habana Vieja. The ritual is done every year on November 16 in honor of Yoruba deity Agayú, synchronized as San Cristóbal de La Habana, and entails a small coin offering at the foot of the tree and making seven rounds of it while touching the trunk firmly.

Chapter 7

Fieldwork

“A small knife for cutting vines, I soon discovered, was more useful than a gun, and the most infallible field method was to approach the natives with honesty and love...”

—Pearl Primus (DeFrantz 2002: 120)

“My success as an ethnographer necessitated a continued negotiation of role expectations based on my light pigmentation, my femaleness, my middle class status, and my American citizenship.”

—Faye Harrison (1990: 98)

“I might not have come at all, for all the difference it has made. I was accepted and one of them.”

—Katherine Dunham (1946: 132)

In the photograph that opens this chapter, I walk with several other people around an *iroko*—la ceiba or silk cotton tree—located near the main cathedral in one of the oldest parts of La Habana Vieja. The ritual is done every year on November 16 in honor of Agayú, syncretized as San Cristobal de La Habana, and entails a small coin offering at the foot of the tree and making seven rounds of it while touching the trunk firmly. Agayú is the ever burning fire at the center of the earth and the cracks (volcanoes) that allow this energy to surface; a portal between worlds. Agayú is said to carry people across great divides and obstacles (Edwards and Mason 1985: 49). The *iroko* symbolizes for Cubans

(and other Caribbean people¹⁰⁰) a link with ancestors and things African. One can only imagine how many millions of souls have circled the ceiba. They retrace the steps of the ancestors and prepare ground for future generations. Their palms press against the bark: spiritual home base and source of vital force (*aché*). This ritual is analogous to my fieldwork experience. In the very act of taking to the field I retraced the steps of many anthropologists who did so before me—from Lewis H. Morgan, Bronislaw Malinowski, Robert Lowie, Alfred Kroeber, Margaret Mead, St. Clair Drake, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude Levi-Strauss, to Clifford Geertz, and John Langston Gwaltney—using their tools, refashioned, to do ethnography, part of the work of representing culture. That is, humbly entering a community, interacting and learning through participant observation, actively waiting to understand, or in Boas' words “come to terms” with a given culture, running away from and into myself.

Melville Herskovits, William Bascom, Fernando Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera, Pierre Verger, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Sydney Mintz, Robert Farris Thompson, and others traveled along the Atlantic continuum as researchers before me. As an African (American) on the path, seeking to establish an academic voice, I was accompanied especially by Dunham, Hurston, and Primus. Just as “hot rhythm” and “cool science” battled for possession of Dunham and Primus who used their fieldwork as raw material for dance creations, they also vied for Hurston whose meticulously collected folklore became the metaphors, allegories, and performances in her novels (Hurston 1990b: 294). This combination of art and social science continues through me as I perform ethnography and envision the diaspora through the lens of my camera.

In the photograph of the ceiba, a man looks off into the distance, perhaps at those next to perform the rite, for on this day people arrive constantly and wait in line. All that

¹⁰⁰ Katherine Dunham documents that in Jamaica British officials negotiated and signed a peace treaty with Cudjoe, leader of a rebel community of escaped slaves, under a silk cotton tree (Dunham 1946: 13).

he sees is connected to the tree and to the ancestors, through his hand and his very gaze. My own eyes stare into the camera. My presence represents a present (now) that links the past and future to Africa. African Americans and Cubans are family, connected to each other by what we have of Africa within us, and by our similar, often interconnected histories. My gaze marks the ethnographic moment; the time I spent in Havana and have told about in this piece. My gait has the seriousness of the new initiate, not the swagger of the adventurer. I have come to honor and comprehend something of our connection. I agree with Pearl Primus that honesty and love are the most essential ingredients of any successful approach to fieldwork.

About her fieldwork experience in Africa, Primus writes: “I am fortunate to be able to salvage the still existent gems of dance before they, too, fade into general decadence. In many places I have started movements to make the dance again important. Ancient costumes were dragged out, old men and women—toothless but beautiful with age—came forth to show me the dances which will die with them” (Martin 1963: 185). She expresses the sad heaviness of ethnographic fieldwork—a “rescue” enterprise of missionary zeal and valiant, yet hopeless, effort, since everything, even culture, must die or at least change. On another melancholy note, Levi-Strauss feels himself “maimed”, a perpetual outsider who endures a “chronic rootlessness” because he cannot refuse this work, which has, in a sense, chosen him. “Like mathematics or music, anthropology [characterized by fieldwork] is one of the few genuine vocations. One can discover it in oneself, even though one may have been taught nothing about it” (Levi-Strauss 1992: 55). Boas, in the introduction to Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, describes an important key to her work and ethnography in general as “gaining confidence” from a given community (Hurston 1990a: xiii). What he calls her “lovable personality” and “revealing style” is really her skill as a guide along the paths of the diaspora. My own motivation to do anthropology—which, as a cultural anthropologist, I consider inseparable from ethnography—came from a desire to write about African and African American culture

“now”, before it became history, and thus the province of historians who lie¹⁰¹. Like Frantz Fanon, I felt the need to “prove the existence of black civilization at all costs” (Fanon 1967: 34). Ignoring that anthropologists lie too, or that our discipline could be “just another way to call me a nigger” (Gwaltney 1980: ix), I decided never would I allow them (whoever they were) to say that mine were a people without history or culture (Herskovits 1990). Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, a student of Herskovits, contrasts historical and ethnographic study respectively as research into the “past” and “present”, and recognizes the benefits of combining these approaches (Beltrán 1989: 10). I feel the immediacy of the ethnographic project. As the song goes: “Now’s the time” always. I agree also with Levi-Strauss that anthropology is “a form of history, linking up at both ends with world history and my own history” (Ibid.: 58). Like Hurston in *Mules and Men* (Hurston 1990a: xvi) or Ruth Behar in *Translated Woman* (1993: 321), I attempted through fieldwork to effect a genuine reconciliation between my self and my past. Looking at Cuba has been a way of better understanding myself as an individual with scholarly and artistic aspirations in relationship to an evolving culture and history of the African Diaspora.

Katherine Dunham describes an instance in Haiti where her separation from the group—her outsider status, exemplified by her inability to eat a sacrificial food she found disgusting—was erased (or at least mitigated) by her dancing. “I danced more than I have ever in my life, before or after”, she writes, “...and for the first time the ground at

¹⁰¹ According to John Henrik Clarke, “most Western historians have not been willing to admit that there is an African history to be written about, and that this history predates the emergence of Europe by thousands of years” (Clarke 1970: 3). Ivan Van Sertima notes, for example, the “attempt, deliberate and sustained over the centuries, [by historians and other scholars] to deny the contribution of the black African to ancient Egyptian civilization” (Van Sertima 1976: xvii). Basil Davidson cites a “new racism” in scholarship beginning in the early 19th century, which “went together with and was consistently nourished by...[European] imperialism” (Davidson cited in Van Sertima 1995: 6). Carter G. Woodson observed that, “the philosophy and ethics from our [U.S.] educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching” (Woodson 2005: xii). He continues: “The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor...depresses and crushes...the spark of genius in [black people] by making [them] feel that [their] race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples” (Ibid.: xiii). See also Melville Herskovits’ *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1990).

my feet was kissed” (Dunham 1994: 234-5). Levi-Strauss writes of Dunham in the foreword to her book *Dances of Haiti*: “To the dignitaries of the vaudun who were to become her informants, she was both a colleague, capable of comprehending and assimilating the subtleties of a complex ritual, and a stray soul who had to be brought back into the fold of the traditional cult” (Dunham 1983: xvi). Though no Katherine Dunham, I dared to take on the task of writing about Cuban music precisely because I can dance, and only under this condition—having lived the music and experienced its meaning through movement, catching *the common beat*—could I forge words that swing.

Like Barbara Browning writes of her experience in Brazil, in Cuba I learned many things with my body (Browning 1995: 167), both dancing and just being. Fieldwork is a “fuzzy liminal space” where tension between wealth and poverty, black and white, foreign and local are rehearsed again and again (Jackson 2001: 9). Just as I observed how los especuladores exemplified “identity fashioned in the crucible of behavior” (Ibid.: 171), as an anthropologist in the field—where self and other clash and converse (Clifford 1988: 8)—I too would have to perform (Op cit.: 184). For extended periods I lived in the neighborhoods of Pogolotti and Los Sitios¹⁰², at the Supercake building in Centro Habana¹⁰³, and on Calle 25 in El Vedado¹⁰⁴. I conversed with musicians, musicologists and all types of students and lovers of Cuban music, not to mention of course the many friends and other citizens who are the average Cuban. As a child of Eleguá I went and *got down*, that is observed and participated, everywhere I could: street corners, *callejons* (alleyways), brothels, museums, CDR meetings, tourist banquets, clubs, street parties, libraries and archives, Carnival, the homes of important artists and

¹⁰² Both Pogolotti and Los Sitios are considered marginal neighborhoods. In the past both areas have been home to *cabildos de nación*.

¹⁰³ A high-rise apartment building at the corner of Belascoain and Zanja, a comfortable place at a crossroads where several neighborhoods meet.

¹⁰⁴ Twenty-fifth Street, one block away from the Habana Libre hotel, Cine Yara (movie theater), and Coppelia ice cream parlor.

intellectuals, government offices, beaches, etc. In Victor Turner’s words I engaged in “disciplined abandonment” (Turner 1982: 100).

In what follows I describe my experiences in different spaces—religious, musical, academic, dance, and everyday spaces—to show how my identity as an African American man from the middle class conducting fieldwork in Havana highlights important realities about social relations in contemporary Cuba.

EVERYDAY SPACES

When I arrived in Havana in 2002, my long dreadlocks greatly affected peoples’ perceptions of me. Most did not like my hair at all: “Why don’t you cut that stuff off!?” Kids called me *el güije*, after a supposedly humorous character on Cuban TV. He has dark skin, wild, dread lock-like hair, speaks *bozal* Spanish, and wears tattered cave man clothes. I found out later that this was a caricature of a figure from Afrocuban mythology. In the collection *Afro Cuba*, Jesús Cos Causee’s poem brings out the deeper concept of the güije:

The *güijes* slept from Africa to Cuba
and only awoke when they heard
the drums. They came through
storms and crossed the seas in the face
of Caribbean hurricanes. That’s why they
are children of the rains and live in the waters. They
say a slave tired of being a slave opened
the jars and the *güijes* escaped, this the
cane field knows, and so does the moon
of that night the slave was seen to open
the jars and the *güijes* came out, while he sang
a freedom song (Sarduy and Stubbs 1993: 61).

My experiences spanned a gamut between the oppression and rejection blacks face and the unity and magic of collective identity and resistance.

Cosas de la vida

Faye Harrison talks about how her African Diaspora aesthetic, including braids, African garb, etc. affected people during her fieldwork in Jamaica. In her experience, her hair for the most part set people on edge, made her a bit suspicious. A woman had the nerve to tell me “this is the first time ever in life I met a handsome black man (*negro bonito*)!” This was already a slap in the face of the race. But on top of it, she had actually met me before. Only on our first encounter I wore dreadlocks, and she, like most folks, had hated them. Some thought they were novel or cool (*on me*, not in general), but most folks agreed they should be cut and replaced with some other style.

During a morning jog along the Malecón a police officer sized me up and took my exercise for a getaway; as I began to run, he nearly ran after me to request documents, etc. I let my annoyance show and we began to converse/argue about racism in Cuba. He claimed it was gone, had been defeated, look how much Cubans of color can do, look at how *your* (U.S.) government and police treat blacks! But why did you stop me, isn't it obvious I'm jogging like everyone else? You looked suspicious. How was I to know you hadn't stolen something?

Blacks are stopped more often on the street by police to produce ID and be checked out. This scrutiny was even more intense for a black man with locks. Only a few, usually artists or people who had traveled outside of Cuba could appreciate my aesthetic and endeavor to discover what I was like inside. Later in my stay I cut my hair to see if it made a great difference, which it did not. At times I was taken for a student from the Caribbean or Africa, but almost never was I accepted as an African American researcher. It was as if no one could conceive of it; that identity slot did not exist. This despite the work of Hurston, Dunham, Harrison, Daniel and other scholars of color in the region, and despite the presence of black American medical students on the island. Sometimes after days of interaction with a group of people someone would ask, “So,

what part of Oriente [Eastern Cuba] are you from?” and when I responded that I was from the U.S. they would say, “Yankee-land? Yeah right! Where are you *really* from?”

As happens often in academic and other white collar spaces I was stopped at the entrance to the Museum of Music by a white gentleman who asked, “And what did you want, sir?” A young Afro-Cuban man who also works at the Museum had been watching, and immediately his eyes met mine—he too had experienced this moment many times. Inside the museum I watched Gregorio Hernández Ríos “El Goyo”, present on the role of *el barracón*, or slave quarters, in the syncretized creation of “Afro-Cuban culture”. I was surprised to see him there because he is renowned as a *rumbero*, a musician not an academic, and I felt how his presentation shocked the scholars present—mostly white anthropologists, musicologists, and ethnomusicologists—into silence. He talked of his experiences as a black man in 1950s Cuba, going to prison for fighting to defend his honor, as a way of understanding or approximating the experience of the slave in the *barracón*. In non-academic language, subtle yet very clear in its intent, he compared enslaved blacks during colonial times, to jailed blacks during the Republican era, and, without addressing it directly, sounded a strange note about the status of Afro-Cubans today. Due to my own experiences and those of others, I wondered if the electric silence that filled the room was not caused by realities of how black experiences in Cuba have changed and remained similar.

Por proxeneta/For being a pimp

After cutting my hair I was to observe a concert by La Charanga Habanera at Café Mi Habana in Hotel Capri. While waiting outside, a friend asked me to do him the favor of bringing in with me a young woman who would not be allowed to enter alone, due to certain rules in place to control prostitution¹⁰⁵. In the back of my mind I worried if this

¹⁰⁵ Women generally cannot enter nightclubs alone, and often strictly couples are admitted.

might cause some problem, but I went on. Once inside I was interacting and talking with other musician friends, enjoying beer and the deejayed music before the show. There was a strange German youngster who talked only of Marx! As he droned on ignoring the music, a huge bouncer approached me (sports jacket too short and all) and asked, “Where’s the girl?” I responded “I don’t know” and since he didn’t move on I continued, “Maybe she went for water or to the restroom”. He became visibly angry now, and I began to speak in English, since I was always told that nothing could ever happen to a tourist in Cuba. “Don’t speak to me in *American*,” he said in Spanish, “you are more Cuban than I am!” It occurred to me that he was reading the situation all-wrong. Before I could explain I was picked up under each arm by two guards, the doors and velvet partitions were opened, and I was tossed into the driveway, confused for a *proxeneta*, or pimp. Only later, accompanied by an important bandleader and with documents from the Ministry of Culture and the Fernando Ortiz Foundation was I allowed to come back to the club. This story brought tears of laughter to the entire staff at the Foundation, where I was a guest researcher. The particular kind of confusion that it exemplifies was certainly responsible for their suggestion that I research and write a piece on public dances in Havana, which are considered dangerous. After all, I was more Cuban than them.

This brings up the question of “going native”, always a concern for ethnographers, as it bodes the end of scientific knowledge. Malinowski suggested that ideal participant-observation takes place at the boundary between complete integration and academic distance, where the ethnographer can perceive and consider even the *imponderabilia* of the community under study, but maintain enough perspective to effectively analyze them. Considering the merits and dilemmas of identification as a source of knowledge, Renaldo Rosato invokes Dorinne Kondo, a Japanese-American ethnographer whose own image reflected in a mirror—transformed into that of a typical Japanese woman—surprised and frightened her (Rosaldo 1989: 180; Kondo 1990). Kondo became dizzy with fear that she had lost herself, or remade herself too well,

attempting to understand the community she was studying. My own “near-native” identity was responsible for the club incident, and was jarring in a way similar to Kondo’s experience. Events like this one taught me about perceptions of blacks in Cuba, gave me a clearer idea of what really does happen in certain music/dance spaces, and gave me greater impetus to ascertain motivations for these perceptions and behaviors.

Conversation with Eduardo Rosillo

Everyday and academic spaces and happenings flow into musical ones. I met Eduardo Rosillo in Santiago de Cuba, and later I tracked him down for an interview at his home in Havana. He is a well-known and very knowledgeable radio personality (Radio Progreso) and historian of Cuban music. He talked a lot about the flow between society, necessity, and music. One example he offered was the story of Arsenio, *el ciego maravilloso*. Arsenio Rodríguez was blinded by a kick to the head from a horse that ruined his optical nerves. Relocated from Matanzas to Güines he began to learn to play the tres; one day they started calling him *el diablo*, the devil, because he played the strings with his feet. Later on when he perfected this style he began to use the name himself.

Rosillo says that Arsenio incorporated the tumbadora, or conga drum, into the *conjunto* format for social, not musical, reasons: the rowdy members of his band would often leave him stranded after gigs—to go drink and party—so to avoid this he hired a family member, someone he could trust, who only knew how to play congas. When Antonio Arcaño heard the new sound, he added the conga drum to his own charanga style orchestra, which altered that musical format forever. (All of this according to Rosillo is from firsthand accounts.)

Only with the conga drum could the so-called “nuevo ritmo” be developed which made way for the mambo and chachachá. That is to say, without Arsenio none of these hugely important rhythms would exist. One day in Los Angeles, California, Arsenio said

to Pérez Prado, “Tú sabes que yo inventé el mambo”, to which Prado responded, “Sí, but it’s me making the money off of it!” Rosillo emphasizes that in popular music there is no “invention”, everything flows and emerges from socio-cultural necessities.

RELIGIOUS SPACES

Even though Santería religious music and culture were not the main focus of my research they are an important part of Cuban life, and figured also as part of my personal journey in Cuba. In these spaces too I learned about myself and perceptions of me. I learned about the religion first through my friend’s mother, who later became my *madrina*, my godmother or tutor in the ways of the Yoruba descendants in Cuba. She was not at all mercenary in her treatment of me. I say this because, just like Christians pass the collection plate, the *lucumí* communities of Cuba must deal with economics too. Sometimes this aspect can overshadow the spiritual, especially when foreigners (*yumas*) and their money is concerned. I underwent a rite of passage called *kariocha*¹⁰⁶ in which I was consecrated as a devotee of the deity Ochun. This involved seven days of intense ritual activity, involving dozens of functionaries and musicians who contributed their *aché* to various phases of the process in the form of knowledge and hard work. Sacrifices were made, special meals prepared, oral and drum liturgies recited in order to bind the spirit of the river to my head.

I know that the priests and ritual specialists called upon for the various ceremonies I experienced were always glad to see me. Since I was from up North there would be better pay and better refreshments (from the dollar store) for all involved. In this way global economics touches spiritual belief and practice; the same global dynamics that affect the dance spaces discussed throughout this piece come to bear also on these

¹⁰⁶ In Yoruba it means to “put orisha on the head”. In Spanish and English this becomes “hacer santo” or “make saint”. Saint in this case refers to the Yoruba orishas. (See Mason 1992: 21-32; Hagedorn 2001: 212-19 for descriptions of the ritual process.)

religious spaces. On one hand I was isolated by my North American origins and money; they constituted barriers that made it difficult for me to trust people and win people's trust. On the other hand, because of my African roots, my skin color, and my ability to dance and drum, I could sometimes out perform these limitations based on nationality and class. At those times I became one more strong arm, another voice calling down orisha. These moments allowed me to embody the Afrocuban essence that I talk about as being preserved and perpetuated in timba and the dance spaces of Cuba.

Ocha Birthday

On my third "birthday" as an initiated priest of Ochun I left my place in Vedado in the morning to find coconuts, white candles, and various fruits, then I went directly to my madrina's house in Marianao. I hopped in a *carro particular*, those 1950s cars that work like buses shuttling back and forth along the main arteries of Havana, and headed way up 51st street. There she had dressed all the orisha and their containers *de gala*, wrapped in fine, colorful fabrics. I remember thinking to myself, "She truly does respect this religion and our friendship, *eso sí se llama querer*". She hadn't seen or heard from me for a month, as I'd been at carnival in Oriente or otherwise occupied chasing musicians around Havana. With her at my side we *gave coco*—divined with coconut—before each orisha. At intervals we became enthralled and got goose bumps from the energy of our prayers. All the orishas responded positively, this had been a good year, though it would be necessary to give more attention to *egun*, the spirits of the ancestors. We lit two white candles, placed a coconut whitened with *efun* powder by Obatalá, and gave a mango to Ochun and Obba, okra for Changó. Afterwards we talked a while, put on some music and had lunch, La China, her mate El Moro, and as they called me—El Umi.

Ossode

In Cuba, people apply the term *padrino* or *madrina* (godfather or mother) to their spiritual guides, who are their mentors in African ceremony and also become extended family. Whenever it was time for me to do ceremony with my padrino babalawo, the man who prepared my *mano de orula*, he would dictate to me a list of things to get. One special offering for the odu Ogunda Bedé included: three railroad pins, three slices of yam, three okras, a toasted mix of ground corn, *jutía* (a rodent), and fish, dirt from inside the house and from work, strips of different color fabric, honey, *aguardiente*, and a chicken. Usually to get these items I would go the marketplace at *Cuatro Caminos* (Four Roads) just outside Old Havana, or if I was already by his place in 10 de Octubre district I would go to someone's house in the neighborhood. Padrino would usually come with me, or if I went alone I spoke carefully because any hint of a foreign accent raised prices. Among his services are *ossode* (Ifa divination) and *ebbo* (ritual sacrifice and/or offerings to the orisha). Sometimes there is a line to see the man, like at the dentist or the barbershop. As folks waited we drank a little coffee or cold water and talked about the day. *No es fácil. ¡Qué calor, caballeros! ¡Maferefún Changó todos los días!*¹⁰⁷

Journal Entry: Ebbo Orunmila

Today I made *ebbo* with two beautiful white hens for Orunmila. Aché, modupué, dupué. I always like to make sacrifice before I travel, to open the road. The usual gesture is to feed the warriors (Eleguá, Ogun, Ochosi, Osun) and Orunmila. It was poetic, the hens were very pure white and very large. In the odu Ofun Bara, hens like these were given to cool Orunmila's anger. They are his favorite animals and I see why, as beautiful as they are. I kneeled at his feet after the sacrifice with two white candles lit to pray for my own and my family's health, success in what remained of my stay in Cuba, a safe return to California, discipline, energy, money. I prayed for work and even for a car. And afterwards we ate poultry—the meat of the sacrifice—together.

¹⁰⁷ It ain't easy. It's hot you all! All praises to Changó everyday!

Different Worlds

This level of acceptance and fellowship was the norm for me in religious settings. Still the fact of my North American-ness—tied to stronger economic possibilities and a history of exploitation and control over Cuba—was always present. On one occasion when I had planned a toque for my godfather, I was accused by *las malas lenguas* (community gossips) of wanting to document the festivities for later sale or other vile mercenary purposes. This was not the case, but it highlights the reality of a split between North and South, and the fact that I am able to bear off their lives, their *aché*, as data, while the members of this community are mostly forced to stay (Behar 1993). Once here on this side of the border, in possession of knowledge and translated stories, I have more access to venues to spread them and benefit from the process. I will be a professor largely because of what I learned from people in Cuba who may never have access to the world I live in. Pedro Sarduy and I took a photo together after a joint interview with a musician in Havana, and he commented that we were much alike: we favor each other and our research interests in Afro Cuba were similar. But there was also a big difference. “You are American and I am from the Third World”¹⁰⁸, he said.

Sarduy was reminding me that, as an ethnographer conducting fieldwork, I was “somewhat innocent and somewhat complicit” (Rosaldo 1989: 69) as a positioned subject from the semi-affluent, professional class of the most powerful nation in the world, despite the fact that as a black man I was also engaged in the process of cultural reconstruction and healing underway throughout the African Diaspora. Just as when Katherine Dunham takes over her hosts’ quarters in Accompong and even has a servant (Dunham 1946: 7) so that she might study them comfortably, my work was motivated by

¹⁰⁸ Sarduy lives and works in the U.K.

anti-imperialist, pan-African fervor *and* facilitated by well known structures of domination. In Cuba, I was reminded in overt and subtle ways of my identity and position. The world system that aided my presence among the Cubans is also (at least partly) responsible for long-term hardship and a devastating current crisis (Op cit.: 86). What Fernando Coronil has called the “geopolitics of empires” (Coronil 1995: xvi) was brought home to me time and again, for example, by the American flag on Cuban bodies.

For at least two centuries the United States and Cuba have had an intimate and complex relationship marked with inequality and exploitation at many turns, but also, undeniably, with mutual attraction. Jose Martí, Cuba’s national hero, lived for many years in the U.S. and theorized here Cuba’s independence from Spain. “America” extracted sugar from the Pearl of the Caribbean and left in exchange poverty and illiteracy due to poorly distributed wealth. Baseball has been a better gift and is cherished in Cuba as the national sport, ball players even escape from the island for a chance to compete and earn in the majors. Hemingway is an adopted son of Cuba. The U.S. government is perpetually at odds with Fidel and the Cuban Revolution, a battle that has entailed resorting to armed invasion, terrorism, counterintelligence, propaganda, trade embargoes, travel restrictions, and daredevil emigration. Simultaneously the neighbors are locked in an embrace of shared historical experience, music, dance, and images, representations of self and the other. To see the flag of United States of America in Cuba is ironic, surprising, yet makes perfect sense. Stories of the long embrace of Cuba and the U.S., in which I am implicated, are told in the colors of the flag and through the eyes of the people, questioning me according to my various identities: Black, North American, Anthropologist, Dancer, Photographer...Cubano (?)

Historian Louis Pérez Jr.'s book *On Becoming Cuban* examines the process by which contact with the North shaped Cuban culture and national identity. According to him by the late 19th century Cubans were already very familiar with what was becoming known as the “American way of life”. It was normal for Cubans to have traveled or lived in the U.S., to use American goods and technology, and to envision their own future linked to that of the U.S., a kind of big brother to the north, a modern alternative to their Spanish colonial past. In 1898, at the start of the American Century, the U.S. military intervened in the Cuban independence war against Spain, just as the Cubans were about to claim victory and sovereignty, and immediately began to increase North American economic and political control, as well as cultural influence on the island. During Cuba’s Republican era, “so thoroughly had North American forms penetrated the structural order of daily life that it was often impossible to make sharp distinction between what was properly ‘Cuban’ and what was ‘North American’ (Pérez 1999: 12)”. However, as North American market culture proved unable to meet Cuban aspirations, the affinity for North American people and ways was increasingly matched by the uneasy feeling “that the potential and the promise of nationality—of being Cuban—was within reach if only the ‘weight’ of North American hegemony could be lifted (Ibid.)”. A passionate love/hate relationship was developing which would express itself in all its irony starting with the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

Considering the harsh policy of the U.S. toward Cuba it is no big surprise that at different times the American flag has been officially banned and/or strongly discouraged in Cuba: it could not be worn on clothing at work, government officials and their families could not have it in their homes, etc. In Havana there is a billboard along the Malecón,

the poetic boulevard along the sea, that depicts Cuban soldiers clad in green army gear
jeering across the ocean at a monstrous Uncle Sam complete with a red, white, and blue



Fig. 7.1 Embrace



Fig. 7.2 Vestido/Dress

top hat, and fangs. The board reads: “Capitalists, we are not afraid of you!” This is the kind of representation of the old stars and stripes one would expect, because from a certain Cuban viewpoint the U.S. flag represents not only the long standing connection between our two countries but also the American desire to control Cuba, as expressed in the Platt Amendment, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the U.S. trade embargo and travel restrictions, the Helms-Burton Law, etc. Anthropologists are present in Uncle Sam’s monstrous shadow, implicated as we are in the imperialist colonial encounter, appropriating and attempting to subordinate and control through knowledge. This valence on the meaning of the flag brought me discomfort on many occasions; the colors burned, for example, when I was in Havana as Bush launched his attack on Iraq.

Among the folks in the streets these days, however, our star spangled colors are being represented on hats, handkerchiefs, T-shirts, underwear, dresses, tattoos, etc., worn in a different spirit. Instead of confrontation, people seem also to express identification with aspects of U.S. culture, like sports or music, and sometimes even infatuation with the capitalist way of life, or the concept of “freedom”, represented by the flag or images of the U.S. greenback. For some the flag represents their connections to people who have come to Cuba as visitors from the U.S. and bring these items as gifts. These are connections forged in peace, not aggression; hope and humanity, not imperialism or treason. These were more hopeful reminders that the ethnographic project—if inextricable from unequal power dynamics—is also a tool to “make oppression morally unacceptable and human emancipation politically conceivable (Rosato 1989: 181)”.

Cuba’s recent action of removing the U.S. dollar from the Cuban economy—legal tender alongside the Cuban peso for the last ten years—heightens the drama of all

representations of North American influence on the island. As the U.S. occupies Iraq, seemingly setting the stage for another American Century, the creative and fiercely independent Cubans, linked historically and culturally as they are to the U.S. are in a unique position to comment on the American way—even the spy glass of Anthropology—through symbolic representations like the flag.

Mistaken Identity

As I negotiated my own identity through dress, speech, etc., I noticed how important these kinds of serious identity performances were all around me. I was fascinated by how much people questioned my identity in Cuba. Why so much doubt, suspicion, and surprise? Was it only with me or did everyone experience this? I don't know anyone else who had the same problem (See Mark Sawyer 2006). I heard of and saw some cases where Cubans assumed different national identities in order to *resolver*, or do whatever needed to be done: a dark skinned man with braids successfully turned Bahamian, though he spoke almost no English, and a lighter fellow became Italian simply by adjusting the accent on his Spanish. Though I've seen scams in a lot of places, never had I experienced anything like this. Fanon discusses a similar situation:

I have known—and unfortunately still know—people born in Dahomey or the Congo who pretend to be natives of the Antilles...This is because the Antilles Negro is more 'civilized' than the African...I was talking recently with someone from Martinique who told me with considerable resentment that some Guadeloupe Negroes were trying to 'pass' as Martinicans. But, he added, the lie was rapidly discovered, because they are more savage than we are; which, again, means they are further from the white man (Fanon 1982: 26).

Assuming another identity—whether Bahamian, Italian, Spanish, Puerto Rican or Dominican—is an attempt to signal and wield increased power in relation to other Cubans, and to get closer, as it were, to depositories of economic or at least symbolic

power (located in nations and languages). Are some Cubans so desperate to be around—*relacionarse con*—foreigners that they pretend to be foreigners themselves? The most skilled impersonators avoid the stigma of “jinetero”, or hustler, by simply disappearing among the tourists. This kind of cleverness is related to the challenges of Cuban life during the 1990s special period up through the present. My own position/identity was highly contested because people expected that I was bluffing, a Cuban trading on the power/access associated with English language, U.S. nationality, and assumed wealth.

La gua gua

The Cuban soul reveals itself often on the bus. During the sometimes long waits for *la gua gua*, people form orderly lines and ask *¿Quién es el último?*, the person after whom they should board the crowded bus. Sometimes these “lines” become chaos when the bus arrives. On board people are encouraged to press on as far as they can to make room for as many passengers as possible. A stranger lucky enough to get a seat will offer to hold an old lady’s package or a young man’s backpack to make the ride easier. There was no machine, but an actual person collecting fares and directing traffic onboard, deciding who was the last person who could fit on the bus, etc.

Once a friend from Guantánamo who was visiting home from the States rented a school bus and a large group of us (maybe 25 people) drove to the beach, passing along the barbed wire borderline of the U.S. Naval Base to reach there. They warned that if you cross over you could be shot. After a lovely day, all set to return home, we discovered that the bus was stuck in the sand. Every attempt to move out lodged the bus in deeper. Everybody got off and we men tried to dig us out to no avail. We regrouped and tried again, still no luck. After a while the women and the children joined in, using pots and pans (empty now of the *congrí*, spaghetti, and *ensalada* we dined on all day) to dig away sand. The children tossed in pieces of wood and stones for the tires to grip. Then together we pushed with all our might, and for a long moment it seemed

impossible. Impossibility was transformed and the bus was lifted. We roared in one voice as *la gua gua* cleared the dune and took the road. No one said “Viva la Revolución” (Long live the Revolution), “Patria o Muerte” (Homeland or Death), “Venceremos” (We will win), or any slogan, but there was an energy, a look in everyone’s eyes that seemed to express the positive human spiritual gifts of the Cuban revolution, mainly faith, and dogged determination. They probably didn’t even all agree about many aspects of the Cuban social experiment called the Revolution, but they had nonetheless all been shaped by it. The spirit of the Cuban people and La Revolución are very much alive! When my friend, la guantanamera, left Cuba that trip she cried and cried.

La Lanchita de Regla

Like many I always tossed a coin into the water as I rode the tugboat across the Bay between Havana and Regla. Usually the boat is full. There are bicycles and people of all hues, shapes, and sizes. The ride inspires a meditative mood, and most riders watch the water in silence. The day before yesterday three men who kidnapped one of these tug boats and headed for the U.S. were executed by firing squad, damned in the end because the U.S. refused to help (as they were still in Cuban territory) and the Cuban government refused to give them fuel to continue. They were apprehended and we all thought they would be put in jail forever *y punto* (period), that would be it. But the reality was different. They were executed and quickly, only two days after their capture. Now they’re telling me that there have been protests here near Coppelia and on the Island of Youth, which is closed off now, no entrance nor exit. They say they are yelling “¡Abajo Fidel!” The kidnappers had been killed so quickly, though they had not injured anyone, and only wanted to leave Cuba and go to the United States. This struck an odd note with many. I’ve seen nothing of this on the news where the events were relayed with great pride as a matter of necessity. Yaneisy tells me that the mother of one of the

kidnappers has called Fidel a terrorist. Surely the U.S. and some of their follower nations will do the same as well. Some people called the spring of 2003, when these events took place, *la primavera negra*.

Tambor

Añá is brotherly love. Here with these fellow drummers I rediscover the camaraderie I knew with my old high school friends, and with my little league baseball teammates. It's a feeling every one should know and never lose from their life. Today I played for Ochun, just for a moment. The music was wonderful and I was able to make a photograph or two. I recorded many songs. I continue to feel a very strong sense of fraternity with these brothers. With them I witnessed a ceremony where several men were consecrated *omo Añá*, sons of the Spirit of Sound. I too am sworn to the drum.

Toque in Regla

Another toque, this time in Regla. There were a lot of white santeros and babalawos, all Cubans. Many seemed a little unfamiliar with the tradition: knowing only the most basic chants, saluting the drum in incorrect order, watching more than actively participating, being unable to clap *la clave cubana* (2-3), or dancing rumba to batá rhythms that traditionally call for other, specific steps and gestures.

I played for the first time in a ceremonial setting, which was exciting. I played okonkolo on four rhythms (Eleguá to Inle) as a substitute for another drummer who was late. I messed up at the start of Eleguá and again on Obaloke, because I got nervous, but even still I was proud to have stepped up and not been afraid to play. I was paid 40 pesos as my *derecho* (literally, my right) for sitting down to the drum. Later I sang for a man possessed by Eleguá and got paid 35 pesos for it. The drummers split in half with the singer all the money dropped into the *jícara*, or kitty, as people salute the drums. Obviously the singer gets the bigger share, as he is one man with a whole half of the

proceeds to himself. The lead singer, or akpwon, guides the proceedings with song selection and energy manipulation, seeking the spirit. The derecho for the owner of the drums, who stayed at home in Centro Habana, was about 100 pesos. The sweeter the drums sound, the better organized and punctual the musicians, and the more effective they are in bringing down the orisha, the greater the demand and the higher their price. Drummers for the most part are not rich. On this occasion and others we came and went with the drums by bus. The late, great drummer Jesus Pérez emphasized to his students the importance of keeping a regular job (personal communication with Carlos Aldama).

Fakin' the Funk

In addition to other symbolic meanings the Yoruba orishas are archetypes of male and femaleness. For example Changó, “un negro tiposo” always “en fiesta o con una buena negra” (Fernández 1997: 32)—a big black man, always partying with a fine black woman—represents “total maleness” (Edwards and Mason 1985: 55). The rain is thought of as his potent semen, and even his female children are called “sons” (Ibid.). Ochun, conversely, is consummate femaleness, “as famed for giving children to her worshippers as she is for her beauty” (Bascom 1984: 90). The orishas are not one-dimensional however. They also model alternative interpretations of gender. Changó’s male children wear their hair braided in a women’s style called *agogo* to honor him (Op. cit.). One of Ochun’s many praise names is *obá* or king. In her avatar known as *pasanga*—prostitute or adulteress (Mason 1992: 318)—she explodes notions of passive female sexuality by using sex to gain power and control in the world (Op. cit.: 98). The orisha Oyá is described as a comely woman, who at the same time “grows a beard (becomes more fierce than a man) on account of war” (Ibid.: 94). Traditions that describe orisha Oduwa, Olokun, and Osumare as *male and female* are maintained side by side (Mason 1992: 240; Mason 1996: 2; Bolívar 1990: 99).

My experience among the drummers of Añá and in the wider religious community taught me more about gender roles in Cuba. I talk about the camaraderie and fraternity I felt with the battery of drummers I played with. Like Changó, the owner of the drums, omo Añá are men's men, tempered with fire and rum. They lead a bohemian lifestyle in which women are one of the rewards of their trade (which in other ways is not lucrative). A female devotee (preferably consecrated to Ochun) serves the drummers during the ritual meal that precedes any major drumming ceremony. Traditionally women do not play batá drums in Cuba, and if they do learn, as some have, they definitely do not play batá drums consecrated with Añá¹⁰⁹. Women are encouraged to keep a respectful distance from the drums during ritual celebrations. They are allowed to salute the drums but discouraged from lingering too close for too long. Sacred drummers, like babalawos, must not be homosexual.

At the same time men embody female orisha like Ochun and Yemayá; and women embody male orisha like Ogun and Changó. Many homosexual men participate in the religion as “horses”¹¹⁰ through which the deities manifest a physical presence among the worshippers (see Matory 1988, 1994 for an in depth discussion). Felix “el pato”¹¹¹ was famous for becoming possessed by Changó, giving penetrating *consejos* to believers, and performing unbelievable feats like smearing bubbling *amala* porridge on his face (interview with Carlos Aldama 2006). In some cases possession is feigned. Here it seems that men imitate the orisha, and in doing so freely engage in female behaviors, otherwise less possible in the social context. This appropriation of sacred

¹⁰⁹ In Santiago de Cuba I interviewed Carmen Batá who claims to be the first woman batá drummer in Cuba. She is quick to clarify that she does not play consecrated drums. (The drums she plays, “son aberikula, no tienen nada de fundamento”). She says she would be interested to play in ritual settings, but would probably have to wait until much older. She had heard tell of an older, post-menopause woman who played consecrated batá in Matanzas (interview 2003). See Hagedorn 2001 (pp. 20-21) and Sayre 2000 on women drummers.

¹¹⁰ Hurston describes it well: “[The deity] manifests [itself] by ‘mounting’ a subject as a rider mounts a horse, then he speaks and acts through his mount. The person mounted does nothing of his own accord. He is the horse of the [orisha] until the spirit departs. Under the whip and guidance of the spirit-rider, the horse does and says many things that he or she would never have uttered un-ridden (Hurston 1990b: 221).

¹¹¹ Vulgar term for homosexual man.

space to express cross-gender impulses through performance reflects both the gender blurring within the Yoruba tradition that nourishes Cuba, *and* the particular macho orientation and rigidity of sexual roles on the island.

Conclusion

Once, during Carnival in Santiago at about four o'clock AM several friends, drummers all, approached me while partying on Paseo Martí in the barrio of Los Holmos, and invited me to join them for a toque de santo in Guantánamo. We went, played batá drums and sang in honor of the orisha, and returned early the next morning to find the carnival revelers we had left still at it. On another occasion we took a longer trip from Santiago to Holguín, further west but still part of Cuba's eastern region. As the ten of us mounted buses and cars along the way I noticed names from Compay Segundo's famous song "Chan Chan", from the Buena Vista Social Club. We were following his musical path: "De Alto Cedro voy para Marcané, llego a Cueto y voy para Mayarí"¹¹². The photograph, Iroko, which begins this chapter, alludes not only to the footsteps of ethnographic forebears, but also to the many paths and people I followed and learned from in Cuba. It suggests cycles that allow us to depart and return to find that the music, ceremony, the (re)search continues through and beyond us.

As an ethnographer in Cuba I endeavored to understand "how people grapple with uncertainty and confusion, how meanings emerge through talk and collective action" (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw 1995: 4) in the context of contemporary dance music and dance spaces. It has been a great surprise and satisfaction to see the reaction of Cuban people (and people who know Cuba) to my images and writing about the island. They are touched and inspired by certain "truths" they say I have captured. The task of ethnographic fieldwork is to create a bridge among people through scientific inquiry and

¹¹² From Alto Cerro I go to Marcané, I arrive at Cueto and from there to Mayarí. This is a route from Santiago to Holguín in eastern Cuba.

empathy. Part of this empathy is what Harrison calls “the ability to see out of more than one eye”. She challenges anthropologists with multiple consciousness and vision to take active roles in the struggle for a decolonized society and science of human kind (Harrison 1991: 90). My goal too is to “enlist anthropological analysis into the struggle for Caribbean transformation” (Ibid.: 91).



Fig. 7.3 Author and Miguel Barnet at Villa Isis, Fernando Ortiz' old home, current location of the Fernando Ortiz Foundation (Vedado)



Fig. 7.4 Author dancing in Centro Habana



Fig. 7.5 Rumba callejera/Street Rumba in Centro Habana

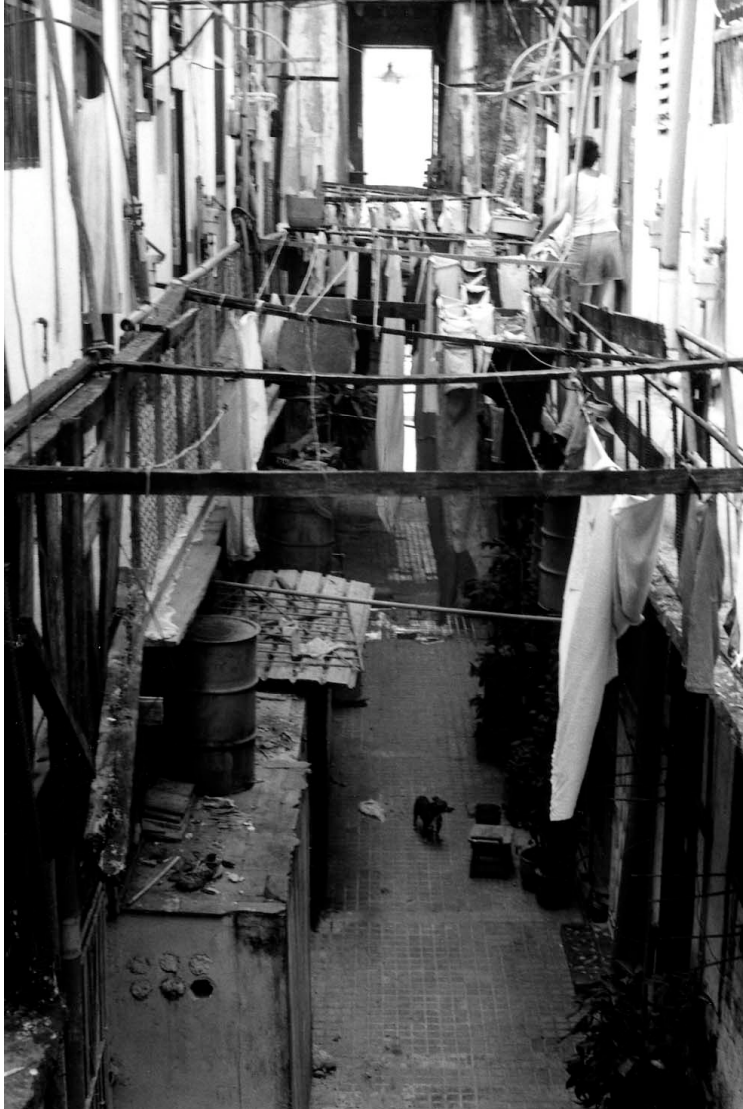


Fig. 7.6 Solar in Old Havana



Fig. 7.7 An initiate salutes the drum in Lawton

Chapter 8

Conclusion: Dancing & Being

Afro Cuba is the product of a history both ugly and beautiful. Since colonial times the aim of Afrocubans has been to gain recognized positions within the society and to act as full members of it. To survive along the way, they took refuge in cabildos, mutual aid societies, celebrations, and religious worship, encouraging unity and cultural counterattack against their oppressors. They expressed themselves at times through newspaper publications or through left-wing political organizations. In the process, a distinct Afrocuban culture developed, gifted with a popular imagination capable of substituting elements and adjusting philosophical values to new social situations with great improvisational virtuosity. As the spaces mentioned above were closed, new ones have developed where the discourse of Afro Cuba is carried on. This dissertation contends that timba music and places where it is performed are spaces where the discourse of Afro Cuba continues. I call timba maroon music because it taps into the spirit of struggle while remaining tied to—even complicit with—dominant forces within and beyond Cuban society.

In the previous chapters I describe the social environment that saw the birth of timba, examine the performance of individuals and communities constructing identity to the timba beat, and consider the relation between music and important extra musical social phenomena that influence it. By looking at the experiences of black Cubans and exploring the notion of Afro Cuba we better understand how timba was born and achieved significance as maroon music in the context of Cuban culture. In timba (lyrics and sound) and in various dance spaces where it is performed, race, gender, and class issues are worked out to its hectic, polyrhythmic beat.

In Cuba, the sounds and performance strategies of Africa have blended with musical crosscurrents from Europe, Asia, U.S., Latin America, and the Caribbean, exemplifying Baraka's notion of the "changing same". Fernando Ortiz affirms that Cuba would not be Cuba without *el negro*. Still, the initial rejection of various musical styles by mainstream society—followed by eventual acceptance—shows the precarious, marginalized historical position of blacks in Cuba. Rumba, danzón, son, cha, Mozambique, and timba have all been marked with the stigma of "chabacanería", but have also been accepted as *muy cubano*—valuable aesthetically, culturally, and economically.

Drawing on African-Caribbean musical concepts like collective participation, call and response, and improvisation timba articulates tensions in Cuban society during the special period. In this context I show how the *especulador* has embodied the ideals of some Cubans (especially Afro Cubans) in the form of a cultural type or performance. *Especulación* blends musical and nonmusical performance. At concerts musicians sing about wealth and display it to their audiences; the audiences "wear" their ideas of wealth

and desire, represented by fashion, gesture, etc. Flashy dress, bluffing, big spending, and machismo are significant symbolic responses by Cubans to the current national situation. The performative dialectic between reality and illusion dramatizes the Afrocuban struggle for equality and opportunity yet to be wholly fulfilled.

By using the term Afro Cuba I do not promote “notions of essence and identity that ultimately restrict and confine black cultural production”. Instead I aim to suggest a notion that “acknowledges a common thread through an infinitely wide range of manifestations” (hooks 1994: 47). Black Cuba is distinct yet one with Cuba. By the same token it is bound also within the wider African Diaspora. My identity as an African American, man, anthropologist, dancer, *omo Añá*, santero, photographer, etc. definitely shaped my experience in Cuba—blocking some paths, while opening others.

The majority attendance of blacks at public dances—and the opposite scene at La Casa de la Música and other dollarized spaces—reveals disparities of opportunity based on color that remain a challenge in contemporary Cuba. They also represent hope as locations for potential social transformation, through personal, community, and national identity formation in the context of popular music and dance.

This ethnography of contemporary Cuba is significant because it follows up on the research of scholars of race, gender, and class in Cuba within the specific context of Cuban music and dance spaces. It tells what Afrocuban voices, instruments, and performing bodies have to say about contemporary Cuba, which is itself in dialogue and struggle with the outside world. I echo Paul Gilroy in signaling the “power of music in developing black struggles” and the need to analyze lyrical/musical content and form as well as the social context.

Particularly important contributions of this work include: the discussion of a maroon aesthetic extended beyond the colonial era to the context of contemporary society; deep description of the dance spaces of Cuba (bailes públicos, La Tropical, *el molote*, etc.); and the examination of the performance of identity and desire through the character of the especulador. It is part of a new generation of scholarship of Cuban culture since the fall of the Soviet Bloc, taking its place alongside works like Sujatha Fernandes' *Cuba Represent!* (2006) which considers how Cuban hip-hop reinterprets notions of what is “revolutionary” in the Cuban context. It also compliments works focused on dance (and other) spaces of social transformation throughout the African Diaspora like Donna Hope's *Inna di Dance Hall* (2006), about reggae and urban culture in Jamaica.

By reading timba lyrics, considering its sound and performance, and analyzing the self-performance of individuals influenced by it—in both musical and nonmusical contexts—I show Afrocubans reacting to and actively shaping the social, political, economic moment in which they are living. Through various kinds of performance around timba, they fashion ways to *escape* perceived inferiority, unattractiveness, and reverse their historical marginalization in Cuban society. In this way timba is maroon music in contemporary Cuba. Dancing and being—creating, dancing timba music as well as performing the self according to specific strategies in various spaces—Afrocubans extend an historical identity into the future which is in dialogue and tension with wider Cuban society.

Chapter 9

Epilogue: Remembering Manolín

Since my last visit in 2003, the buildings had endured three more years of rain, wind, sun, and the strain of life, the people were stretched thin. I realized the seriousness of the promise/prophecy of Cuban revolution and redemption. It is as if the place is being ground down almost to dust. Nothing. But spirit remains. Life goes on. The drum speaks, babies are born, quinceñeras, velorios, la pincha, la rumba, la novela. Cubans are incredibly resilient and patient. Some say “Cuba no cambia” (Cuba doesn’t change), but things do shift.

The major debate in Cuba while I was there was about the future of the country without Fidel. The phrase “eternal comandante de la revolución” struck me because it says that Fidel will be present always through his ideas and the system he set in place, even when he is physically no more. Most people were shocked when he turned over power to his brother and seemed genuinely afraid of what will happen when Fidel dies. Some conjectured about whether he was already gone. Some celebrated in the exclusive areas of Havana—champagne and cell phone calls to Miami, “*estamos en tiempos de cuento*” they said. Most agreed that things would definitely NOT get out of control, *que*

estaba todo pensao, especially with iron-fisted Raúl at the helm. There would be no all out chaos. There were more guardias about Havana. Where before a single officer may have stood at the crossroads of 23 and L, now each of the four corners are manned with multiple guards. Army reserves were activated to defend Cuba in the event of a U.S. attack.

Fidel was mostly absent from the TV screen but omnipresent in the street on posters, banners, book covers, and billboards. “Vamos bien” (We’re fine) was one billboard I remember. The image of an old but vital Fidel proclaims his eternal presence, in spite of physical frailty and even beyond death. What did come on TV was footage from the various rallies held throughout the island to show support for Fidel and wish him a speedy recovery, as well as demonstrate strong patriotism and commitment to continuing the revolution no matter what, with or without Fidel. The people spoke passionately (if scriptedly) about how *el pueblo cubano* has learned its lessons well and is prepared to carry on. Federations, unions, and individuals are ready to fulfill their responsibilities to the patria. A rumbero from Santiago, member of the group Yoruba Andabo sang, “*Yo soy hijo de Fidel, yo cumplo con mi deber*”—I’m a son of Fidel, I fulfill my responsibility.

In the Santería community there were many more babalawos (priests of Orula, the divination deity) than I’d ever noticed before. Often there were more of them than santeros (priests of other orisha) at toques. I heard people say that since they were a source of income, initiations into Ifa, Santería, and the sacred batá drum tradition of Añá were becoming less exclusive and more common. Some said it doesn’t cost as much as it used to: “Qualquiera con quatro pesos (anyone with a little money) can become a

babalawo.” Initiations bring material and economic, as well as spiritual wellbeing, so initiators are not turning folks away. I saw *iyanifa* (women priestesses of Ifa) for the first time in Cuba. Many, especially young people, seemed to be making ocha *para especcular*.

In the mid to late 1990s, Manolín traveled the world electrifying dance floors with his timbero style, while remaining based in Havana. His stint living and performing in the U.S. inspired the song “Ya tengo amigos en Miami” (I already have friends in Miami) on his 1997 disc *De buena fe* (In Good Faith). This song did not sit well with Cuban officials in the context of hostile U.S./Cuba relations, though fans on the island were not opposed to it. After remaining for a time in the U.S. he returned to Cuba and attempted to make things work there, but was unable to. As a result of his first visit to Miami he was censured on Cuban radio. He says that the Cuban government was “unable to understand [his] position” and even told him that he would have to stop performing as El Médico, to instead be a backup singer for an unknown salsa band called Fiebre Latina (Castro 2001: 1).

After a year and four months back in Cuba, Manolín relocated definitively to the U.S. “for my daughter, my music and my ambition to take my music to the farthest corners of the earth...and to break taboos” (Castro 1999: 2). After struggling for several months to gain permission to do a TV program in Mexico, he made his way to Atlanta, GA where turned himself over to immigration officials and was jailed for a week while his case was sorted out. He realized full well that he was by no means assured success as a musician in this new country: “[The U.S.] is a very difficult market, and it means starting over from scratch” (Ibid.). Speaking to his fans in Cuba he said “Thank you very

much, because I owe it all to [you]...everything that I am today, and the fact that I have come here does not mean that I have abandoned [you]. I have [you] here with me—[you] are the ones who give me strength. Someday I hope [you] will understand and feel proud of me.”

El Médico has released just one studio album since his move to the U.S., entitled *Tal como soy* (As I am) from 2003. This production was a total departure from his timba recordings of the 1990s. The slow tempo and absent polyrhythm of the songs highlight the fact that Manolín was never a great vocalist. For fans that expected another stroke of timba genius this production was certainly a disappointment. Still I remained a hopeful fan.

At the end of my visit to Havana in 2006, I received an e-mail invitation to a concert by Manolín, El Médico de la Salsa with the Timba All-stars in San Francisco. Upon returning to California, I went to the show and had a surprising experience. Manolín whom I had never seen live in Havana because his shows were always sold out, even if they cost \$30 (an extremely expensive ticket), was performing to a small audience of not-so-enthusiastic fans. Instead of a fine suit he wore a very regular long sleeved T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. It was like surprising the little ordinary man behind the mask in Oz, or learning the truth about Santa. The larger than life timba all-star, who made so much magic, seemed only regular, humbled, cheapened.

Maybe this was the last show on the last night and he was tired. But the energy was low. Manolín seemed bored with what he was doing, as he sang only the hits from ten years ago. To me, he represented the threat to the revolution posed by the special period and recovery measures, that hedonistic musical moment when things transitioned

for a time closer to capitalism. Cuba had survived the crisis, moved on, and could now jeer at Manolín as the well-known Havana billboard jeers Uncle Sam: “*¡Señores capitalistas, no les tenemos absolutamente ningún miedo!*” (Capitalists, we are not afraid of you!). He also represented Cuba itself, so tired. *La guerra cansa*, war is tiring. Even wars of ideas.

The exciting initial burst of timba onto the scene as a fresh approach to Cuban dance music is done. The basic elements of a style or subgenre have been set and are referenced by all kinds of musicians in and outside of Cuba. In a popular *paladar* (restaurant run out of the home) in Centro Habana there is a mural (Fig. 9.2) that features some of Manolín’s most famous lyrics:

*Tú te fuiste, y si te fuiste perdiste...
Yo no, yo me quedé guarachando*

You left so you lost...
I stayed here grooving (dancing and being)

In 1995, when this song (La bola) was wildly popular in Cuba it spoke of lost love, but also—in veiled speech—to those who left the island as political dissidents or in search of economic opportunity, especially the thousands of *balseros* who left in 1994. The lyrics become ironic and strangely nostalgic when we consider that Manolín has since left himself (Castro 2001). In the mural, these lyrics are the backdrop against which people eat and converse. El Médico is gone, but not totally forgotten. He has marked Cuban music and society. Similarly, though timba is relatively less hot today than in its golden era boom of the 1990s, it is still a major part of Cuban life. In restaurants, homes, clubs, weddings, public dances, etc. Cubans work out who they are and who they aspire to be, to the timba beat. There is some question, though, as to

whether or not timba can survive outside of Cuba. Separated from the neighborhoods of Havana and the unique chemistry of that translucent city, even El Médico, with his tongue of fire, may find himself with nothing meaningful or magical to say—tongue tied¹¹³.

Back in the U.S., faced with the task of writing about Cuba, I understand even more the delicate task of representing culture. At a recent exhibit of my photographs called *Cuba en colores*, I met an American woman who is an advocate for Cuban sovereignty, has founded an organization based on U.S./Cuba relations, travels regularly to the island, etc. As we spoke about debates on race included in my thesis, she became very angry that certain authors' ideas were included. To her, any "negative" portrayal of Cuban society was not only a disservice to the country's noble, largely successful social project, but a betrayal. I can hear the warnings of Cuban friends who advised me to avoid polemical issues or direct criticism in order to preserve my ability to travel to Cuba—one wrong word and I might be out. I feel the danger of being too critical and betraying the openness Cuba showed me. However, if I remain silent about the inequality of blacks the story is incomplete and I betray my pact with informants, anthropologists, and others interested in a society without race as a determinate of life possibilities and status. The pact entails that I (as scientist and griot) will honor and further the (Afro) Cuban tradition of struggle—also our time, interviews, books, etc.—by documenting, analyzing culture, and helping to create more space for Afrocuban voices to speak and be heard. This way Cuba and even the world could benefit. In Behar's words, "there is danger in speaking and in being quiet" (1998: 5).

¹¹³ An article about Issac Delgado's defection from Cuba in 2007 mentions Manolín among Cuban musicians, particularly timberos, whose careers "flopped" upon relocating permanently to the U.S. (Levin 2007).

Because of its history of struggle and its current positioning vis-à-vis the U.S. and other world powers, Cuba inspires much passion. This may increase in the near future. Fidel's transition out of power opens up new possibilities for political reform on the island. At the same time, the aftermath of the Bush administration may also bring change in U.S. policy toward Cuba, as a less conservative, less reactionary leader takes the helm. Both of these "new beginnings" have re-focused attention on Cuba and intensified debates among those interested in Cuba's fate. Whatever happens, representing Cuban culture—like creating it—will likely remain an intricate dance fraught with political and emotional consequences. Future research along the lines of this dissertation will show how music and dance reflect and affect change in the context of ongoing social transformation. May Changó and all the orisha guide my steps and those of the researchers that follow.



Fig. 9.0 Cuba postcard with Changó symbols



Fig. 9.1 Manolín, El Médico de la Salsa



Fig. 9.2 Te fuiste/You left (Remembering Manolín)



Fig. 9.3 Guarachando (Dancing & Being)

Appendix 1

Timba Timeline

1954 Stadium Tropical (Later Salón Rosado de la Tropical) is born as an important dance space that would become the “thermometer of salsa music”, comparable to the Palladium in New York, a crucible of popular music and dance. It was used for night dances while the older “gardens” (Jardines de la Tropical, dating back to 1904) were used for matinee functions.

1959 Fidel and his revolutionary armed forces take Havana on January 1.

1960 Under Law #890 nationalizes many private own businesses in Cuba (October 13). Washington cuts off normal diplomatic relations with Havana.

1962 Total trade embargo imposed (February 27).

1962 Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) is created. The schools of music there produce musicians of world-class technical and expressive skill.

Salon Mambí is opened at the old Tropicana nightclub. It is one of few dance spaces functioning during the mid to late 1960s and 1970s in Havana.

1963 Benny Moré, El bárbaro del ritmo, the king of popular dance music in Cuba, dies (February 19). His career marked the development of danzón, son, mambo, and chachachá, all of which are sources of timba.

1964 Cuban record company EGREM (Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales) formed.

1967 Orquesta de Música Moderna is founded by the National Council for Culture (which later becomes Ministry), under the direction of saxophonist Armando Romeu. This group spawns musicians that later join or found other bands of great importance in the development of timba (e.g. Chucho Valdés who created Irakere).

1968 Musicians become employees of the state, organized and contracted as members of booking agencies (empresas de espectáculos). All places where alcohol is consumed, including dance spaces like La Tropical, are closed down for at least one year, a blow that slowed the development of popular music.

Still, this same year the group Elio Revé y su Changüí is born.

1969 Juan Formell founds Los Van Van after a brief stint with Elio Revé.

1968 Pablo Milanés, Silvio Rodríguez, Eduardo Ramos, and Noel Nicola—all singers from the Nueva Trova Movement—join Grupo de Experimentación Sonora (Sound Experimentation Group). This collective developed the song of social protest and experimented with advanced techniques of composition and performance, sewing seeds that would blossom on the edge of Cuban music's future—Irakere, Afro-Cuba, Síntesis and others.

1970 José Luis Cortés joins Los Van Van where he plays flute and sax, composes and arranges.

1971 Congress on Education and Culture takes place. The interest of Cuban youth in foreign music is an issue of concern.

1972 Nueva Trova becomes an officially sanctioned movement under the sponsorship of the Communist Youth Union.

1973 Anglo-American pop and folk music is banned from radio airwaves for approximately one year. Pianist Chucho Valdés founds Irakere.

1976 Ministry of Culture created under new socialist constitution.

1977 Jazz Cruise to Havana brings renowned North American jazz musicians, like Dizzy Gillespie, Earl Hines, and Stan Getz, to play in Cuba.

1978 Orquesta Son 14 is born under the direction of Adalberto Álvarez. Irakere tours U.S. and plays the Newport Jazz Festival.

1979 Concert at Karl Marx Theater in Havana featuring musicians from U.S., including salsa artists Rubén Blades, Héctor Lavoe, and Roberto Roena. Cool reception by Cuban audience suggested that people wanted to hear rock and jazz, not reformatted son (i.e. old Cuban music).

1980 José Luis Cortés leaves Los Van Van to join Irakere.
First-ever Festival Jazz Playa (to become famous Cuban jazz festival)

1983 Oscar D'León performs in Havana, reigniting the dance music scene on the island.

1984 Adalberto Álvarez relocates to Havana and founds Adalberto Álvarez y su son.

1985 El Salón Rosado de la Tropical reopens its doors.

1988 José Luis Cortés together with several other daring musicians founds NG La Banda (New Generation Band).

Berman Amendment to embargo regulations allows “informational materials” including films and sound recordings from Cuba to enter the U.S. for the first time in decades.

1989 The fall of the Soviet Bloc and the start of the so-called special period in Cuba, during which timba assumes a clear shape and personality.

Cubartista, a highly bureaucratic booking agency managing foreign engagements of Cuban musicians was dissolved and replaced by Artex, another state-owned but more independent agency.

Pianist Juan Carlos Alfonso—after being a composer, arranger, and musician with Revé—founds his own group Dan Den.

José Luis Cortés and NG La Banda tour the neighborhoods of Havana (something that had never been done) in what was called “gira por los barrios”.

1991 First Festival of Dance Music in Havana.

Cuban television program “Mi salsa” (My Salsa) starts, featuring Cuban dance music.

In October Communist Party membership was opened up to revolutionary Christians and other religious believers.

1992 The Cuban Constitution was changed to reflect that the state is now “secular” rather than “atheist”.

After stints with various groups (among them Opus 13 and Dan Den) Pablo Fernández Gallo founds his own band Paulito F.G. y su élite.

Toricelli Bill passed in U.S. congress, strengthening trade embargo against Cuba.

A second incarnation of La Charanga Habanera launches under the direction of David Calzado, with a new style that, along with other groups, would come to define the timba movement.

El Salón Rosado becomes El Salón Rosado Benny Moré de la Tropical in honor of the great singer.

1993 The dollar is legalized in Cuba and becomes an important if polemic reality in the day-to-day life of the Cuban people.

Musicians are authorized to negotiate their own contracts and recording deals with foreign companies.

La Casa de la Música and El Palacio de la Salsa open up in Havana, beginning a golden age of timba music and dance.

Manuel Simonet, pianist from Camagüey, founds Manolito Simonet y su Trabuco.

1994 Manolín, el Médico de la Salsa records his hit song, “Una aventura loca” (A crazy adventure), first in a long list that would mark a special moment (some would say an extended ecstasy) in Cuban dance music.

Street riots in Havana lead to the balsero crisis in which 35,000 Cubans left the island.

1995 Lazarito Valdés debuts his group Bamboleo at Festival Jazz Plaza.

1996 Manolín makes a successful tour of Europe, bookmarked by send off and welcome home concerts at La Tropical, both of which are legendary.

The Helms-Burton Law tightens embargo against Cuba.

1997 La Charanga Habanera is sanctioned and punished with a year’s silence for a performance considered too vulgar. Elio Revé dies and his son Elito assumes leadership, making the group’s sound more contemporary and entering the timba arena.

1998 Varadero ‘98, a concert that brought together the stars of timba under the leadership of Juan Formell, Adalberto Álvarez, José Luis Cortés, David Calzado, Paulito F.G., Manolín, el Médico de la Salsa, and Issac Delgado.

Abdala (a six million dollar, world class recording studio) is created in Havana.

2000 Juan Formell y Los Van Van win their first Grammy award for the disc *Llegó Van Van/ Van Van is Here*, a mix of Cuban rhythms with a strong dose of timba.

2001 Pianist, composer, arranger César ‘Pupy’ Pedroso leaves Los Van Van to form his own group, Pupy y los que son, son.

Manolín defects to Miami.

2003 Manolín releases pop/ballad album entitled *Tal como soy* (As I am).

2006 Manolín gives a concert in San Francisco, California.

Appendix 2

Interviews

Aldama, Carlos. Batá drummer. San Leandro, CA, 2004.
Alén, Olavo. Musicologist.
Armas Rigal, Nieves. Dance historian.
Batá, Carmen. Professional percussionist. July 26, 2002.
Betancourt, Joaquin. Violin, producer. September 15.
Calderón de Armas, Rafael. Dancer, repairman.
Carión Blanco, Maibelys. A young professor of folkloric dance at ISA.
Casarella, Liliana. Philologist and journalist.
Driggs, Yoel “Showman”. Percussionist, singer.
Duarte, Tirso. Singer, Charanga Habanera, Pupy y los que son son.
Fabrè, Cándido. Singer. Santiago de Cuba. July 27.
Fajardo, Pedro. Violin, Los Van Van. November 21, 2002.
Fernández Gallo, Paolo (Paulito F.G.). Singer, director, Paulito F.G. y su élite.
Galindo, Aramis. Singer.
Linares, María Teresa. Musicologist.
Luna, Boris. Keyboard, Los Van Van.
Morejón, Hugo. Trombone, drum machine, Los Van Van.
Padura, Leonardo. Writer.
Pedroso, César “Pupy”. Composer, director of Pupy y los que son, son.
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(Except where indicated, all interviews were conducted by the author in Havana in 2003.)

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