"Salvándose" in Contemporary Havana: Rumba's Paradox for Black Identity Politics

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Abstract

In the scholarship of anti-racist struggle in Cuba, *rumberos* (rumba practitioners) are typically ignored for operating within racist folkloric stereotypes that further the commodification and appropriation of Black expressive culture by the state. This ethnographic case study explores how the Afro-religious urban poor in Havana deploy rumba within the sacred sphere to perform an affirming Black cultural difference and create an alternative market in which to secure autonomous economic and socio-spiritual sustenance: *salvándose* (saving themselves). This particular form of political agency finds itself in a paradoxical relationship with the dominant ideological thrust of the "New Afro-Cuban movement" against racism. Using performance theory, Black feminism(s), and political economy, this study found that performances by and for this overlooked sector in the sacred sphere cannot be dismissed as insignificant vis-à-vis antiracist objections to the narrow social definition of Blackness as folklore and the increasingly narrow opportunities for Afro-Cubans in the emerging private market. A performance-oriented lens can offer key insights into how alternative Black political consciousness is developed and transmitted across generations.

> … Y vamos a decir marginal eso? Porque demos un bembe, un güiro, un tambor en una casa, para salvar la humanidad, para dar una transmisión a dios, o Olofi, como llamemos nosotros, para salvar una persona que está enferma, para salvar un pueblo, como damos nosotros en los tambores… incidente de muchos artistas, hemos dado tambores nosotros, los religiosos para salvar un pueblo.

> … And are we going to call that "marginal?"[1] Just because we do a *bembe*, a *güiro*, a *tambor* in a house to save humanity, to transmit something to God or to *Olofi*, as we say, to save a person who is sick, to save a people, like we do when we give of ourselves when we do *tambores*…. Thanks to many artists, we the *religiosos* have held *tambores* to save a people. (Vladimir [dancer], 2013)[2]

I: Introduction

Afro-Cuban intellectuals and hip-hop artists have been the focus of recent scholarship on the politics of Blackness in Cuba, understood to be the spokespeople of the most constructive path for dignified Black subject hood within the revolution (Saunders, 2015; Perry, 2004; de la Fuente, 2008; Perez & Stubbs, 1993; Zurbano, 2004). This article draws attention to a sector of the Afro-religious urban poor who are often positioned as peripheral to this "New Afro-Cuban movement" (de la Fuente, 2012).[3] Performers of Afro-Cuban religious and popular traditions, like Yoruba Andabo, are overlooked in the literature on antiracist struggle because they operate within the racialized stereotypes of "folklore" that perpetuate controlling images of Blackness.[4] These stereotypical images of naive joviality play into the state's appropriation of Black expressive culture to further its goal of projecting a racially democratic national imaginary. The Afro-Cuban women that seductively pose wearing fruit-laden headdresses while smoking habaneros on Cuban national TV and on the street corners in tourist areas are a familiar part of

[1] In Cuba "marginal" has a strongly negative connotation and is used to describe impoverished areas and forms of social delinquency associated with the inhabitants of those areas. This term is racialized in its usage and commonly applied to both the Black urban poor's cultural traditions and forms of sociality.
[2] All translations by the author unless otherwise indicated.
[3] "Afro-religiosidad" most commonly refers to the Afro-Atlantic religious practices of the Yoruba-based faith system (called *Regla de Ocha* or *Santería*), but also refers to the Kongo-based Palo Monte tradition and Abakua religious fraternities derived from the Ekpe people of the Cross River region in Nigeria. I will use the term "New Afro-Cuban movement" in this essay to signal not only those individuals living on the Island, but the Cuban and non-Cuban scholars abroad who study the movement and partake in the ongoing dialogue of ideas around racism and anti-racist struggle in Cuba.
[4] Collin (2000) uses the term "controlling image" to describe stereotypes of Black womanhood "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" so as "to justify Black women's oppression" (p. 69). It can also be applied to how the dominant culture disempowers subordinate groups.

the country's semiotic landscape. Their colorful images reflect off each other, reproducing mirror images of the souvenirs sold in gifts shops, naturalizing a colonial, pastoral representation of harmonious racial-sexual order (Lane, 2010). The figures that comprise the "New Afro-Cuban movement" take issue with the state-promoted fetishized folklorization of Blackness and Afro-Cuban religiosity.[5] Instead they propose that institutional reform, primarily within the education system and the mass media, hold the key to combating structural racism and diminished Black life chances. In this article, I explore how the Afro-religious urban poor in Havana's most marginalized neighborhoods deploy rumba within the sacred sphere to perform an affirming Black cultural difference, while simultaneously supporting an alternative market where autonomous material sustenance and socio-spiritual sustenance is secured: *salvándose* (saving themselves). The particular form of political consciousness exhibited by professional performers of Afro-Cuban popular traditional culture finds itself in a paradoxical relationship with the dominant ideological thrust of the "New Afro-Cuban movement" around the commoditization of folkloric markers of *cubanidad* (Cuban identity) from which the state profits. In this essay, I argue that the practice of *salvándose* among the Afro-religious urban poor in Havana points to an embodied cultivation and transmission of an alternative political consciousness emerging within a context of great political economic change on a national scale.

In Afro-Cuban religious discourse, practitioners use the verb "salvarse" (to save oneself) to describe the work that they do in their communities. "Yo te salvo a ti, y tú me salvas a mi" 'I

[5] UNESCO defines folklorization as "re-styling the expressions of ICH [Intagible Cultural Heritage] so that they become less complex aesthetically and semantically" (Seitel, 2002). Foklorization is a process in which folk cultural expressions become treated as relics to be preserved under the premise of their eventual disappearance within the context of modern society. Upon their institutionalization in Cuba, traditions were decontextualized and staged as folklore (Guerra, 1989). The term "folklore" in Cuba was introduced by famous Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1951) in the first half of the 20th century. For analysis of the racist depiction of lower-class black expressive culture culture by Fernando Ortiz, particularly in his early work, see Moore (1994).

save you, you save me' is a common refrain that reflects a deeply imbedded ethic of mutual aid for collective well-being rehearsed in religious practice and performed in other forms of community life. As I argue elsewhere, the Afro-Atlantic religious ethos sustains the belief in the ability of people with common interests to "save themselves" through religious labor (Berry, 2016). I claim that this form of autonomy, having economic, socio-spiritual, and ideological valence, modeled by the Afro-religious poor is particularly pertinent due to the current shift in Cuba's economic model that engenders increased inequality along racialized class lines.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The data for this essay are drawn from 18 months of fieldwork in Havana (2012–2014) through participant observation and collaboration with a network of activists, professionals, artists, and intellectuals who are committed to addressing racism in Cuba within the political framework of the revolutionary government.[6] I combined the education I gained in activist-intellectual circles with participant observation and semi-structured interviews with Yoruba Andabo members and their followers, performance analysis of their sacred and secular shows, and intensive study of Afro-Cuban music and dance with the (then) dance director of Yoruba Andabo beginning in 2008.[7] I was introduced to Yoruba Andabo by a mutual friend of the

[6] As a Black woman and third-generation Afro-Cuban-American, I have been able to incrementally gain the *confianza* of research participants due to my prolonged engagement with the Island since 2004. My decade of experiences travelling to Cuba, each time extending and deepening my personal, academic, and artistic networks, has enabled me to forge a multifaceted understanding of contemporary lived experience. As an academic, a dancer, and a direct descendant of working-class Afro-Cubans, my long-term relationships with Afro-Cubans in different social circles, paired with my living in Centro Habana (a predominantly Black, working-class neighborhood) during my doctoral fieldwork, significantly helped me to better situate my own experiences in Havana, the experiences of my research participants, and their perceptions of one another.

[7] My approach has been shaped by Black feminist anthropologists like Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Yvonne Daniel, who argue for the efficacy of the body as a hermeneutical tool based on their study of African diasporic religiosity and their own incorporation of the attendant artistic practices of those traditions (Hurston, 1935/2008; Dunham, 1969; Daniel, 2005).

artistic director, Geovani del Pino. When I formally approached him to ask for his consent to conduct a study on the group, he said that he was averse to foreign researchers, but would grant me permission for four reasons: because I'm young, I'm Black, I'm religious, and we have a mutual friend from the US who is very dear to him.[8] These four reasons give a clear indication of what factors he sees as most relevant in guiding the course of the group. The ethnographic data I collected is consistent in showing that Yoruba Andabo performs a unique form of Black political agency based in Afro-Cuban religious ethos, sustained by community-based socio-spiritual and economic networks, and largely concerned with passing on this tradition to the next generation. This form of agency is significant vis-à-vis anti-racist objections to the narrow social definition of Blackness as folklore and the increasingly narrow opportunities for Afro-Cubans in the emerging private market.

Political economists studying Cuban reform overlook these particular forms of community-based practices of collective agency (e.g., Morris, 2014), while music scholars have yet to fully explore the political economic salience of the performance of Afro-Cuban traditional popular culture beyond tourism and other state-sponsored spectacle (Angert, 2007; Bodenheimer, 2013; Moore, 1995; Daniel, 1991). The analytical weight assigned to the secularized folkloric stage in the existing literature on rumba, centering its commodification via tourism ("cultural jineterismo") and its appropriation via the state (folklore), implies that secular performance is the sole realm for the commodification and consumption of Afro-Cuban cultural heritage post-1959, in general, and post-Special Period, in particular.[9] Yet, the ways in which Afro-Cubans leverage

[8] In the Cuban context, "religioso" means one who is a practitioner of Afro-Cuban religiosity.
[9] In Cuba, "jineterismo" is a category of illegal or semi-legal economic activities related to tourism in Cuba. Some activities include prostitution, pimping, and other forms of hustling.

their intangible resources in religious-specific ways to fulfill life projects constitute an important line of analysis for understanding Black self-making in contemporary Cuba.[10]

My theoretical approach draws heavily on performance studies and political economy studies to assert that performance, as "restored behavior" (Schechner, 1985), is always constructed within the context of particular political economic conditions. Circum-Altantic performance theorist Joseph Roach (1996) conceptualizes performance as an embodied genealogy that documents and transmits cultural practices through collective representation, centering the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas in the creation of modernity (pp. 4–5). My ethnographic case stresses the ways in which the "geneology of performance" of which Roach speaks is not only constituted by a subjects' memory of other embodied practices within a semiotic legacy. The scripted movement one remembers is very much co-choreographed by a scripted economy and the particular political mise en scène. This interdisciplinary approach is key for understanding how political economy and cultural-philosophy codirect subjects' courses of action and alter the way in which people pursue coordinated movement toward more desirable futures.

More specifically, I engage Black radical performance theory, which is inflected by a political economic lens, to attempt to address the dilemma that Black ontologies pose to questions of Black expressivity and politics in modernity (Hartman, 1997; Madison, 2010; Wilderson, 2003; Cohen, 2004; Moten, 2003). Fred Moten's (2003) theory of the Black radical aesthetic, as a theory of flesh resisting structural constraint through experimentation, is particularly useful when put in dialogue with Joseph Roach's (1996) insightful understanding of how memory and history construct communities through the body. If we think of performance

[10] For examples of book-length ethnographic studies of contemporary Afro-Cuban religious practice from within the sacred sphere post-1959 see Ayorinde (2004) and Menéndez (2002).

practices as "acts of transmission" (Roach, 1996), then it follows that acts of transmission by Black bodies are inseparable from global systems of material, social, and political inequality linked to the exploitation of African peoples and their descendants as commodities. The movement of commodities and their exchange for capital have guided Black movement(s) and framed Black experience in the Americas. Therefore, moments of Black cultural transfer/exchange are always charged with that history and either implicitly or explicitly are products of the limits of Black representation in modernity.

II: The Challenge to Black "Folklorization": Situating Rumba's Paradox for Black Identity Politics

In contemporary Cuba, artistic and religious expression is one of the few sanctioned mediums for articulating Black cultural difference and practicing self-organization. Race-based social and cultural groups were disbanded after the revolution and civil society was centralized into "organizaciones de masa" (mass organizations) founded by the state.[11] Black cultural difference in Cuba underwent a process of "folklorization" initiated by state institutions like the Ministerio de Cultura, while a militantly color-blind position was officially adopted in other spheres of life. As in other parts of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, "folklore," colloquially synonymous with "Black or African-derived culture," was used to organize and occlude social inequality in Cuba through state-sanctioned systems of cultural production for both foreign and

[11] Examples of mass organizations include Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC), La Unión de Pioneros de José Martí (UPJM), Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC), Comités de Defensa de la Revolución (CDR), and Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de la Habana (FEU).

national consumption to silence the ongoing "problem of Blackness" within the nation (Hagedorn, 2001; Rivero, 2005, Godreau 2006).[12]

Hagedorn (2001) defines Cuban folklore as "the religious performance traditions of those people of African heritage who were brought to the Island during almost four centuries of the Atlantic slave trade," also used to refer to "the apparently secular performance of traditions of Cuba's communities of African heritage" (p. 4). Ethno-religious traditions were selectively integrated into a palatable, secularized form for the stage. The Black working class was seen as one of the primary beneficiaries of the revolution's social welfare reforms, and so their dances on the national stage were important symbols of how the once denigrated African "roots" of *cubanía* were finally being valorized by the state. The revolution's architects called on the *rumbero* to represent the central figure of the revolutionary project as emblematic of the working-class masses and with that rumba was enlisted as a potent symbol of national identity (Daniel, 1991, 1995). Their dancing bodies were symbols of anti-imperialist pride, even while the state demonized Afro-Cuban religious practitioners and maintained a White-hegemonic discourse of social evolution (Berry, 2010). As the revolution adopted an explicitly Marxist-Leninist position, being ideologically pro-Black and religious was considered not only archaic/anachronous, but counterrevolutionary (Ayorinde, 2004). For a country like Cuba, whose economy has depended greatly on tourism since the 1990s, the preservation of "folklore" has been of national interest both ideologically and economically, and with that, the performance of racial democracy that folkloric Black dancing bodies permit. Therefore, the examination of what is produced through the Afro-religious repertoire is important to any study of Black self-making

[12] The silencing of public critique about racism is exemplified during the period of severe censorship and repression referred to as the "El Quinquenio Gris," when Afro-Cuban religions and religious practitioners were specifically targeted and suppressed.

in Cuba, but it cannot be separated from an ongoing contested relationship between the terms of Black subject hood within the Cuban nation-state.

Due to the state's usurpation of e*l rumbero* (a rumba dancer, musician, participant) to officially represent the "humble masses" within Cuba's anticolonial campaign, it has also become the popular figure that functions as a symbolic receptacle for all discourses about the Black lower class. Outside of official state discourse, the stereotypes commonly ascribed to *rumberos* in everyday lexicon are: "marginales," "negros de bajo mundo" (lower-class Blacks), "sucios" (dirty), "guapos," "alcohólicos"(alcoholics), "ambientales" (trouble-makers), "drogadictos" (drug addicts), and "negros sin zapatos" (shoeless Blacks).[13] Rumba is by and large seen as "una cosa de negros" (a Black thing) (Bodenheimer, 2013). The not-so-veiled anti-Black sentiment expressed through disparaging remarks about *rumberos* is prevalent and axiomatic. The stigma is felt by not only *rumberos*, but Afro-Cubans in general who are negatively impacted by the Black body's discursive association with the markedly classed anti-Black meanings attributed to *rumbero*-Blackness. Rumba, Afro-Cuban religion, Blackness, and poverty are so closely associated that to be a *rumbero* discursively implies that one is a Black (or "mulato") practitioner of Afro-Cuban religiosity who lives in a *solar* (tenement building). This fuels a feedback loop that stigmatizes each interrelated attribute. In effect, *el rumbero* functions as a "controlling image" (Collins, 2000) to naturalize or justify the inability of Afro-Cubans to embody true respectability, which is defined through hardworking (deserving), aetheist (modern) civilized subjectivity (Whiteness). In other words, within mainstream popular discourse in Cuba each component of folkloric identity becomes a synecdoche for Blackness as a whole, within a

[13] The term *guapo* in Cuban slang means a guy whose toughness is cultivated on the streets. A *guapo* is associated with the performance of hyper masculinity that is easily prone to violence. The racialized application of the term to Black males, highlighting their behavior as unruly and potentially dangerous, makes "roughneck" or "thug" an approximate equivalent within contemporary US popular jargon.

context of not-always-so-veiled anti-Blackness. Understandably, Afro-Cuban activists see one of their main challenges as distancing themselves from the symbolic burden of representation that confines Blackness to its negative folkloric rendering concentrated in *rumbero* practices of sociality.

Yoruba Andabo don't just perform folklore for the national stage, but have maintained this practice securely within the working-class neighborhoods of Havana with a high-degree of Afro-religious activity, primarily inhabited by people of African descent. In all of my interviews with Yoruba Andabo members, they proudly affirm that their base is not only largely from "humble" economic standings, but also "overwhelmingly" religiously devout. My participant observation at their performances and conversations with their most avid patrons who self-identify as *rumberos* corroborated this demographic assessment.[14] The adoption of self-ascribed *rumbero* identity by the working-class audience members at Yoruba Andabo shows carried with it a certain racialized class-consciousness that can be seen as taking up or taking on the stigmatized controlling *rumbero* image. This positive form of Black cultural difference in the context of a "color-blind" national imaginary through *rumbero* self-identification is particularly salient, considering the convergence of national and international events that took place immediately preceding the particular time period in which my fieldwork was conducted.

Since 2010, the Cuban state, characterized by centralized control and a planned economy, has been actively implementing policies that push its citizens into an expanding but precarious private sector, part of which stimulates a newly emerging middle class. These policies have been implemented within a longstanding nationalist ideology based a rhetoric of racial fraternity and

[14] I do not aim to naturalize the association between the black working class and Afro-Cuban religion, but rather to look at the history of their connection so as to appreciate the meaning embedded in the ways in which *rumbero* identity is hailed, rejected, or affirmed by different actors.

national unity.[15] The new policies and the longstanding nationalist ideology work together to obscure the fact that Cubans of African descent are systematically the least able to insert themselves formally into the emerging economy due to a lack of resources, access to a business education, accumulated wealth, adequate material conditions, and the foreign networks necessary to launch new private businesses. For Afrodescendants, then, the pursuit of social mobility is negotiated within a sociocultural milieu that supports the folklorization of Blackness through secularized spectacle. On the one hand, the current state of affairs in Cuba opens up discursive space for the formerly taboo notion of "autogestión" (worker self-management) and self-determination outside the state. On the other hand, it steers those without material resources toward the music and entertainment industry within the tourist sector where their intangible cultural resources can be most easily exchanged for foreign hard currency.

The New Afro-Cuban movement has taken discernable shape during this time of economic transition, in which racialized class divisions have begun to emerge and, in many ways, coalesce. I refer to the New Afro-Cuban movement as a social network consisting of hip-hop artists, visual artists, writers, academics, and activists who share common grievances about racism and its social effects and who began to successfully push the discussion into the public debate since the 1990s (de la Fuente, 2008). The general sentiment I witnessed during my time working with this network was that "conscientization" of the Black working class was needed in order for the popular base to see the value in the proposals set forth by anti-racist experts and to join their mobilization to help the state more fully achieve its socialist ideals. Of course, there is not uniform consensus among every actor within the movement, but what I am highlighting is a strong discursive trend that undergirds the logic behind the kinds of claims and actions this group

[15] This can be traced back to the imaginings of the Cuban republic most emblematically associated with the writing of the so-called apostle of the nation, José Marti (1975).

was mobilizing around in anticipation of how the national economic reforms would negatively impact the lives of Afro-Cubans on the Island.

The activist-intellectuals presented a view that the less educated, poor Black sector of the Cuban population, those who would benefit most from anti-racist ideology, needed to have their consciousness lifted by the intelligentsia. The Cuban population's perceived hesitancy vis-à-vis anti-racist reform was largely attributed to the power of White cultural hegemony within Cuban institutions where Black people are systematically mis- or underrepresented. The significant exception to this underrepresentation was stated to be in the folkloric entertainment industry, where Black overrepresentation functions to reproduce fetishized controlling stereotypes of Blackness. The grievance of the New Afro-Cuban movement against folkloric entertainment reminds us that the meanings assigned to the ways in which Black subjects creatively move within their limited field of agency is inextricably attached to how black bodies are positioned within a historically situated semiotic field and how Black flesh is ultimately held captive by its own representation.

Following the charted path for Black struggle within the New Afro-Cuban movement, scholarship in and about Cuba has structured respectable, antiracist political *conciencia* (consciousness) as being necessarily linked to a dissociation from "folkloric performance" and alignment with a redemptive rights-based discourse connected to policy reform of state institutions. Thus it follows that state-sponsored folkloric performance groups, like Yoruba Andabo, and their followers are ignored as having any political relevance. Given that the artistic repertoire of Yoruba Andabo is so firmly grounded in African-based cosmology transmitted through Afro-Atlantic religious practice, rumba's sacred modality cannot be understood completely outside of a sacred epistemology. Black feminist theorists such as Jacqui Alexander

(2005) and Katherine McKittrick (2006) have opened up a space to take the sacred seriously as a political realm for Black self-making that exceeds traditional conceptions of "civil society."

Yoruba Andabo compels us to consider that the "entertaining, dramatic display" of spectacle should not be assumed to be void of meaning, even when pleasure and diversion are at the forefront of the project. The central place of spectacle *within* ritual speaks to the Pan-Yoruba belief in "the creative capacity to shape the world" during the fleeting period of time in which the ritual manifests (Drewal, 1990). Everyone in ritual (and in life) is engaged in the same exercise to alter their current conditions, seizing opportunities to extend their power and influence, and move the situation in their favor. *Asé*, the power-to-make-things-happen, is embodied through movement to intricate rhythm and song to transfer divine vital forces into the plane of materiality.[16] Beyond its value as a communal aesthetic display, Drewal explains that spectacle is both entertaining *and* efficacious, both metaphorical *and* instrumental (5). Through the space of performance, the invocation of knowledge practices by rumba groups such as Yoruba Andabo's members and the community of religious followers they service resist, reinforce, and re-shape relations of inequality and subordination to which these racial differences are bound, while fulfilling their inherited obligations to their ancestors and to the future generations to come.

To legitimize itself as socialist (promoting distributive justice over capital accumulation), the Cuban state—perhaps now more than ever—must find a way to deal with its Black poor. Naming rumba as national patrimony in 2012 shows not only that Blackness is being publicly incorporated in the current national project in strategically folkloric terms, but that *el rumbero* is still the state's popular figure of choice to make a statement about the place of Blackness within the revolution. The "rebirth of rumba" prompted by its new patrimonial status comes at a time

[16] See Thompson (1984).

when social inequality is on the verge of explosion. Subsuming Blackness under the umbrella of *cubanidad* in the current socioeconomic moment enables a hegemonic common sense that denies the ways in which Blackness is not just a cultural demarcation, but is also defined by one's experience vis-à-vis one's unique relation to social, political, and economic factors (Omi & Winant, 1994).

So, on the one hand, the Black poor is the demographic sector that both the state and Afro-Cuban activist-scholars present themselves as representing. The *rumbero* is seen by those very same activist scholars as an overdetermined folkloric figure representing the Black poor that is only useful for the state's hegemonic project of projecting false racial inclusivity. Therefore, the folkloric body is often what Afro-Cuban activists strive to define themselves against to promote a more liberatory vision of Black subject hood in revolutionary Cuba, which makes folkloric entertainers charged and contested signifiers in the political economy of Blackness and within racial discourse in Cuba. This essay urges a rethinking of the signification of the *rumbero* and demonstrates what a serious interrogation of its performance practices might lend to discussions about self-organization by and for Afro-Cubans today.

II: Working the Sacred Market, *Salvándose*

> Nosotros tocamos la música sacra pero no la llevamos a la escena. Lo que llevamos a la escena es nuestro folklore. Lo sacro queda por la actividad religiosa.
>
> We play sacred music but we don't put it on stage. What we put on stage is our folklore. The sacred we leave for religious activities. (Geovanni del Pino, April 19, 2013)

Una rumba pa'ochún

Family and friends are gathered in a home near the malecón in Centro Habana. The musicians are exiting the alter room where they have just finished the *oru al trono*.[17] Ochún has been brought to the earth and reminded of her life so that she may join the celebration to follow. Ochun's son is fulfilling his yearly promise to her, to host a rumba in her honor, giving thanks for all of the blessings she has given him that year and so she may continue to do so. He pulls out a $20 bill and touches it to his forehead, then kisses it before placing the bill in the *jícara* at the foot of the congas. His sister joins him directly in front of the musicians and they mark the rhythm with their feet, exchanging knowing glances and smiles. The pulse soon cascades up to their hips, then shoulders, and runs off their fingertips, flicking the energy back to the drums. It is a mood of solemn jubilation. Stillness is chastised. Every body present, young and old, must work to make the event a success. The sounds resound out the window and into the street on this sunny Sunday afternoon. Everyone in earshot is a witness to this pledge fulfilled. The vibration of the drums ricochet down the corridor, reverberating against crumbling cement walls until they finally reach the vast Bay of Havana. For three hours the community diligently responds to calls of the *akpwón* in body, in voice, and in spirit. More and more rum is poured as the sweat drips down steadily moving bodies, evidence of their labor.

Members of the religious community contract members of Yoruba Andabo to play at their ceremonies because they are experts in the sacred liturgical repertoire. Their expertise is earned as a direct outcome of their personal involvement in religious life as practitioners themselves. The high degree of social capital attributed to these professionals within a religious context is tied to the serious stakes of the ritual.

[17] Oru al trono is the ritual execution of liturgical rhythms and songs in a specific order to open a ceremony to propitiate the divinities. "Oru" derives from the Yoruba word "oro" meaning conversation or word.

> Cuando tú toques en una casa religiosa… las personas lo están haciendo con una fe muy grande para resolver el problema en ese momento. En el campo religioso va a atender a una persona religiosa por x motivo…. [La artista] tiene que estar bien claro de lo que estás haciendo porque estás jugando con la vida de la persona.
>
> If you are playing in a religious house… the people hosting the religious party are doing it with a lot of faith to resolve the issue at hand. In the religious camp, you have to treat a religious person for x motive…. [The artist] has to be very clear because you are playing with the life of that person. (Jorge Luis [singer], April 23, 2013)

This form of social capital cannot be accrued through formal education, nor can its rewards be accounted for or understood within the dominant secular culture. Instead Yoruba Andabo's successful career as ritual artists is the result of a generational education process tied to the maintenance of an alternative Afro-Cuban worldview based in the religious house (*casa-templo* or *ilé*) with the explicit aim of resolving pressing issues affecting the lives of community members.

Yoruba Andabo's artistic services in the sacred market are indeed commercialized (in a fee-for-service model) and foster a climate of pleasure and diversion. However, instead of enlisting rumba to add value to the national cultural tourism industry, these performances are the nuclei that brings together Afro-religious practitioners across generations, where techniques of intragroup subsistence are rehearsed. The ritual confluence of drum, song, and dance is the fundamental motive for the community to come together because their synchrony are the chief means through which one establishes communication with the divine, in/through the body in movement: *salvándose*. The ceremony is part of a reciprocal system between the living and the spirit world that in turn sets off a commercial chain that reverberates through the religious community. Ceremonies are so frequent and commonplace that it is not uncommon for three to five (or more) to be taking place in any given week in any of the predominantly Black, working-

class neighborhoods in Havana. At these ceremonies performers can typically earn anywhere from $20 to $50. Additionally, there is an opportunity for religious workers (who provide the manual labor and specialized knowledge required to carry out a ceremony) to make as much or more in one week than they would in one month working for a state agency. Having a religious income grants them the ability to meet their basic material needs and put some money aside for when they are called on to host a ceremony for their own personal motives. Sponsoring a ceremony entails great expense and requires considerable savings accumulated through financial strain, sacrifice, and even extra-legal transactions. However, the fulfillment of one's personal spiritual needs or resolution of one's immediate life problems in effect contribute to the financial maintenance of the community network, thus continuing the cycle of reciprocity. In this sense, the performance of the (social/collective and corporal/individual) body is choreographed through a series of reciprocal acts to achieve predetermined goals, both metaphysical (qualitative) and material (quantitative).

Yoruba Andabo's busy ceremonial schedule, due to their increasing popularity, has allowed the group to achieve a certain level of economic self-sufficiency despite the meager salary given to state-subsidized performance groups. Rumba music, in particular, is most often enlisted for *veladas de santo*, *cumpleaños de santo*, and religious "after-parties," but the members of Yoruba Andabo are equally skilled in performing for any religious occasion (including *tambor de fundamento*, *Abakuá plantes*, *güiros*, or spiritual *cajones*), giving them increased sacred marketability.

Their demand can be attributed to the high frequency of ceremonial activity in their communities in conjunction with the prestige of their group locally, nationally, and

internationally, as a result of their acclaimed folklore performances in secular venues both in Cuba and abroad.

> Hay personas religiosas, y tienen la necesidad de dar una fiesta en su casa religiosa tanto un tambor de fundamento o como una rumba como un cajón pa' eggun…. Van a buscar el mejor grupo que hay. A Yoruba Andabo. Porque nosotros estamos vinculado con la religión directamente. Porque esas personas que nos contratan para hacer esas actividades tienen sentimiento religioso, pero busquen el apoyo de ser más religioso, buscando Yoruba Andabo. "Van tocar en el cumpleaños de fulana? sabes quién me va a tocar? Yoruba Andabo! El mejor grupo que hay aquí!"
>
> There are *religiosos* that have the need to give a religious party in their house, like a *tambor* or a rumba, etc…. and they are going to find the best group [to play at their party]: Yoruba Andabo. Because we are linked with religion directly. Because that person that contracts us has a religious sentiment and looks for the support to be more religious in Yoruba Andabo. [And they brag,] "You know who is going to play at the religious party of so and so? You know who is going to play for me? Yoruba Andabo, the best group around!" ("Chan" [singer], 2013)

The members of the rumba group have earned personal respect in their communities based on their years of experience in and knowledge of religious liturgy and the reputable training and advisement of their godchildren. For instance, Chan, a lead vocalist and founding member, is a highly respected *ñañigo* (an Abakuá member), and all of the members of Yoruba Andabo are practitioners if not "crowned" priests in the Ifa-Orisha tradition (including their one White member) and/or *paleros*, *espiritistas* (some occupying positions of the most seniority and repute), who have initiated godchildren into those various Afro-religious traditions. Their social capital in the Afro-religious realm deems them trustworthy, skilled artists with "the creative capacity to shape the world" in ritual. Furthermore, their record of international travel grants them added local prestige, because it is an especially rare privilege for working-class Afro-Cubans who do not have family abroad. Yoruba Andabo's savvy negotiation of the particular professional demands put on folkloric groups when navigating the display of religiously rooted

art forms as folklore on the secular stage, both nationally and internationally, enhances the aura of their sacred virtuosity.

Despite seasonal lulls or unexpected droughts in religious activity, Afro-religious practitioners consider labor within the sacred market to be more reliable and holistically worthwhile for getting through times of hardship and scarcity than formal labor.[18] Besides one's moral obligation to participate in the ceremonies of one's *casa-templo*, I found that many members of the Black urban poor are increasingly driven to make the life choice to work "full-time" in their religion instead of getting state jobs or trying their luck in the private sector, where they are systematically at a disadvantage. "Tú me salvas a mí, yo te salvo a ti."

These "full-time" Afro-religious workers are often counted within Havana's indices of the officially unemployed population, bolstering the dominant association between Blackness as a marker of vagrancy and laziness expressed through disparaging appraisals of *rumbero* sociality. Thus, the unambiguously commoditized performance of rumba in the sacred sphere points to an alternative way of employing the Black body that is read as counterproductive to social well-being and a drag on national development by state bureaucrats.

III: Perspectives on the Course Toward Progress in Cuba

The critical distance from the secularized exploitation of Black cultural production does not imply that their performance, even in the sacred sphere, is somehow shielded from the effects of the global market. However "distant" the sacred sphere may appear from the expanded "private sector," the economic "actualización" being ordered on a national scale is indeed co-choreographing the very tempo/rality of rumba performance. To purport otherwise would be to

[18] The practice of economic self-reliance promoted through religious practice during the most historic period of economic crisis the Revolution (The Special Period beginning in 1989), is discussed in Hernandez-Reguant (2010) and Ayorinde (2004).

fall into the very folkloric tropes of Black bodies as timeless figures in a primitive state against which modern subject hood is defined. The notion that performance is the place where political economy is embodied resonates here with one of the drummer's reflections on what it feels like to be a *rumbero* today.

> Ahora hay que tener efectos. Antes se tocaba con 2 cosas, ahora uno toca 4 o 5 cosas a la vez. Porque es asi. La vida te va enseñando que tiene que hacer más para comer…. Porque una persona no puede tocar una sola cosa na más. Hay que tocar todo, hay que tocar congas, hay que tocar bata, hay que tocar güiro, chekere, ay que cantar…. Hay que hacer de todo. En el grupo, la mayoría de las personas hacen de todo; cantan, tocan, bailan… y eso se paga. Es como el reloj. El reloj no se para, es pa'lante. Asi va la rumba, así va todo… Y no es porque la vida esta duro, es porque la vida es pa'lante.
>
> Now you have to have effects. Before you [the drummer] played two things. Now you have to play four or five things at the same time. Because that's the way it is. Life teaches you that you have to do more things to eat…. And now, one person can't just play one thing. You have to play everything. You can't just play the congas. You have to play *bata*, you have to play *güiro*, you have to play *chekere*, you have to sing…. You have to do everything. In the group, the majority of the people can do everything; play, sing… and that pays. Life is an evolution, it's forward moving. It's the clock. The clock doesn't stop, it keeps going forward. That is how rumba goes, that's how everything goes…. And that's not because life is hard, it's because life is forward moving. (Julio Cesar "El Gordo" [drummer], 2013)

In this description you can feel the pressure on the body to perform to this new beat interpreted through an Afro-religious analytics. In describing what it takes to be a *rumbero* today the drummer shows how external forces impel the body to perform in more complex ways. The capacity of the body must expand accordingly. The beat is speeding up. "… Porque la vida es pa'lante, no es pa'tras" '… Because life is forward moving, not backward.' "Alante" also means faster in musical terms. If you want to survive, you have to be able to keep up with the time. A new generation is coming up from behind and they are fast moving. These accounts describe the intensification of labor demands on the body in the face of an inevitable force that threatens to leave them in the past.

The members of Yoruba Andabo speak of a "rebirth of rumba" referring to new musical innovation within the rumba form, incorporating "more effects" and different musical genres. However, there is also a renewed demand for rumba on the national stage, providing more publics venues where rumba can be displayed. Thus the current rebirth of rumba is securing young Black participation in this tradition. Seeing growing prospects on the horizon, different generations are coming together around a common forward moving activity.

While Yoruba Andabo's proclamation of a rebirth of rumba entails faith in people's ability to attain salvation through religious study and hard work, the discourse of Afro-Cubans in the movement for racial equality foresees a perilous future. Actors within the New Afro-Cuban movement, such as Esteban Morales (2007), argue that the educational system as it stands inadvertently contributes to the reproduction of an anti-Black culture by inculcating children with implicit bias favoring Whiteness. Furthermore, activist-intellectuals remark that the "updated" market-oriented plan does nothing to address the fact that formal education, which was the primary method of social mobility for Afro-Cubans within the revolution, no longer guarantees prosperity in the private sector and that the accrual of capital is contingent on resources that are largely out of reach to Cubans of African descent. This has lead these explicitly socialist-identified activist-intellectuals to conclude that the state's new social design, as outlined in *The Guidelines* (Partido Comunista de Cuba, 2011), no longer centers mitigating social inequality as an ostensible aim. Now that the most profitable institutions are increasingly re-Whitening in today's Cuba, there is a call to counteract this process through supplemental corrective policy.

In comparison, the creation and maintenance of community-based, independent educational structures grounded in sacred pedagogy, like that exhibited by Yoruba Andabo, makes

intergenerational rumba performed by and for the Afro-Cuban religious community an embodied political demonstration ("a show") that doesn't argue against the state or try to change its institutions from within. Instead, it reveals another way of self-defining and perceiving the world, necessitating an altogether different course of action. This alternate mode of social analysis that conditions their approach to self-making diverges from the platform of the mainstream anti-racist struggle that would have them promote a "conscious" Black respectability. Instead of adhering to dominant discourses of modernity and the democratic potential of modern Cuban political culture, group members choose to pursue a dignified living from their positionality as *rumberos religiosos*, appealing to the folklore category and the *cubanidad* trope when strategic to further that aim. The increased reliance on these techniques for group survival and development bolster a distinctively Black oppositional consciousness in the Stuart Hall-ian (1993) sense, in that it is a marker of difference that presents a counternarrative to the dominant order.

Yet, contrary to what the New Afro-Cuban movement would want, this performance practice does not threaten or critique the state's vision for economic modernization. When I asked *rumberos* why they thought the Ministry of Culture decided to grant rumba national prestige at such a late stage within the Cuban Revolution, they clearly articulated that it was politically and financially good for business, and they were moving with it. *Rumberos* expressed no moral conflict with strategically utilizing the platform given for secular folkloric performance on the national stage to benefit their community-based projects in the sacred market. As the myth of the racially democratic, classless *cubanidad* breaks down, the state will have to repeatedly sure up its socialist image through the strategic recruitment of rumba performance by groups like Yoruba Andabo to maintain the hegemonic order. This puts the *rumbero* as folkloric figure and

community pragmatist in close conversation with each other, even if they are ultimately directing their message to different imagined audiences.

IV: Closing

Beyond rumba's categorization as a form of folkloric cultural expression with symbolic ties to the Black working masses, we can see how those aesthetic affects/gestures/sounds/events swell a body-praxis that functions as an instrument for collective group survival amid structural constraint. Yoruba Andabo's strategic approximation to and distancing from the hegemonic constraints of Blackness as a cultural commodity within the global market speaks to the imperative to experiment under conditions of constrained agency, necessarily transgressing the bounds of respectability (and coherence within Euro-Western logic), which Moten (2003) describes as key aesthetic elements of the Black radical tradition.

Furthermore, the embodied process of practicing different collective forms of development (employing a performatic difference) can also work to strengthen racial group solidarity. If we understand racial formation as a process made visible in lived experience, it follows that this process engenders a production of Blackness that is felt in and through the body within the performatic/nondiscursive register that is a vital site of cultural transmission (Taylor, 2003). As social inequalities along lines of race become more acute in contemporary Cuba not only will racial interpellation (Althusser, 1989) increase, but Black racial difference will be critically redeployed in affirming, race-positive ways through rumba's performance in community-based networks. It is possible that the Afro-religious urban poor will come to feel more "Black," assigning political meaning to the ways their bodies signify counternarratives to the dominant order, as they see that their possibilities for growth are being pursued in more

strikingly distinct ways than their White counterparts. In other words, despite what the State would have us believe about Cuba as a color-blind society based on a unifying nationalist identity, racial formation theory and performance theory coincide in saying that Afro-Cubans could possibly feel Blacker (and White Cubans might feel Whiter) in this new phase of the revolution by the state's own making via its economic transition.

For Afro-Cubans, the new "freedom" to work in private business ("cuenta propismo") offered by the reforms means a return to workplace discrimination, as Cubans gain the right to employ other Cubans as employees without interference from the government. Numerous studies of labor have shown that business owners tend to hire from within their racial group (Fernandez & Fernandez-Mateo, 2006; Stoll, Raphael, & Holzer, 2004), and White Cubans are systematically better positioned to start private businesses. The increased importance of the sacred market for Afro-descendants in contemporary Havana, due to the unreliable prospects for economic development within the formal private sector, might foster a greater illumination of political philosophies that point toward struggle through self-reliance rather than reform within Cuban political culture. Although *rumberos* may perform *cubanidad* on the national stage, the growing weight assigned to their performances in their religious communities to sustain their own material needs will also make evident the inadequacy of the state's program of economic *perfeccionamiento* within a socialist framework. Likewise, the dissimilar approaches that Afro-Cubans employ to remedy that racialized economic imbalance will perhaps reveal a clearer articulation of their attendant political visions.

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