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## Lo Afrocubano: Exploring Afro-Cuban Culture in Music, Literature, & Art, Pre- & Post-Revolution

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*Lo Afrocubano*: Exploring Afro-Cuban  
Culture in Music, Literature, & Art, Pre- &  
Post-Cuban Revolution

Grace Maffucci

Dr. Monica Simal

# Cuba: A Brief History

- ◆ Encountered by Christopher Columbus in October 1492
  - ◆ Followed by Spanish settlement of the island
- ◆ Slave plantation system
  - ◆ Cultivation of sugar and tobacco
- ◆ Wars of Independence from Spain in 19<sup>th</sup> century
  - ◆ 1868-1878 and 1895-1898
- ◆ Slavery abolished in 1886
- ◆ Formation of First Republic
  - ◆ 1902
- ◆ Cuban Revolution and the Rise of Fidel Castro
  - ◆ 1959



# Slavery, Abolition, and Independence

- ◆ Spanish colonialism eliminated a huge portion of the indigenous population on the island
  - ◆ Imported slaves from mostly Western Africa (West) into 1860's
  - ◆ Slaves made up one-third of Cuban population by 1840s
- ◆ Slavery abolished in 1886 (US abolished in 1865)
- ◆ Wars of Independence from Spain (1868-1878 and 1895-1898)
  - ◆ Blacks fought along with whites for freedom against Spanish rule
    - ◆ Therefore they could not be overlooked by Cuban officials
- ◆ Formation of the New Republic
  - ◆ Free Cuban nation comprised of Blacks, whites, and mulattoes

# Cuban Identity

- ◆ Intellectuals in Cuba in nineteenth to twentieth century began contemplating the national identity and exploring aspects of Cuban culture
- ◆ Cuban poet **José Martí**
  - ◆ Famous Cuban writer and presented as the Father of Cuban Nationalism who dedicated his writing and personal efforts to Cuba's liberation from Spanish rule
- ◆ Martí's idea of a “raceless,” egalitarian society
  - ◆ “A Cuban is more than mulatto, black or white”
- ◆ “A Nation with all, for all”
  - ◆ Unity of Cuban nation—a Cubanness that supercedes race
  - ◆ Myth that Wars of Independence “ended” racism



*José Martí (1853-1895)*

# Fernando Ortiz

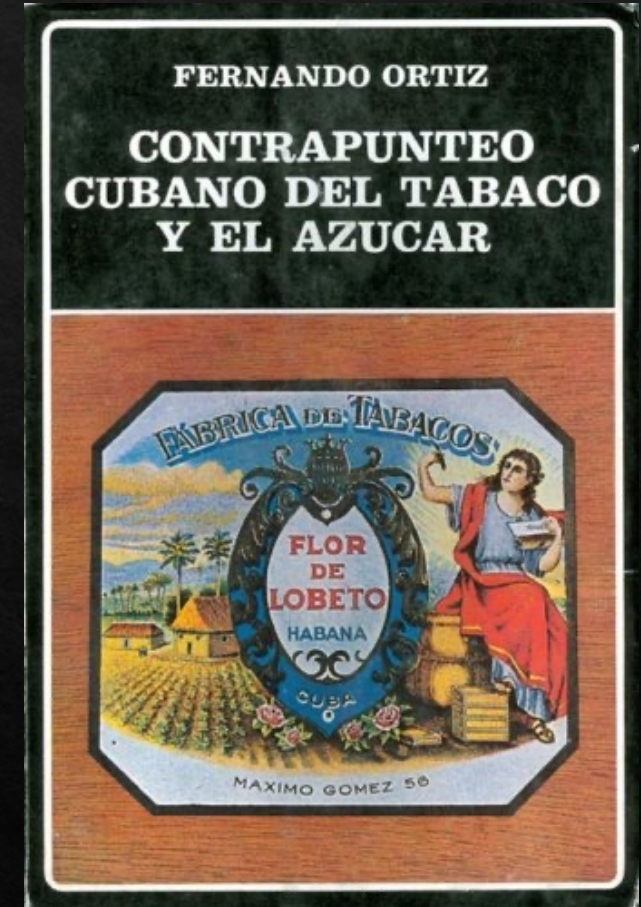
- ◇ Cuban anthropologist and pioneer of Afro-Cuban cultural studies
  - ◇ Originally interested in Cuba's African influence from a racist point of view
    - ◇ Expressed disdain for Afro-Cuban religion, expression, influence
      - ◇ African= primitive, folkloric
  - ◇ Later fought against racism and valorized Afro-Cuban musical and cultural traditions



*Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969)*

# What is *lo cubano*?

- ◆ According to Fernando Ortíz:
  - ◆ A product of *transculturation*—the process of transition from one culture to another that consists not only in acquiring another culture or the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, but in the creation of a new culture as a result of the process
    - ◆ Cuban identity is like STEW (*ajiaco*)—in a constant boil; nothing lost but everything mixed together
  - ◆ “*lo cubano* does not reside in one or the other archetype, but rather in the counterpoint, that is, [...] the transculturation of sugar and tobacco.” (*Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, 1940)



# *Lo afrocubano* according to Ortiz

Azúcar y tabaco en *Contrapunteo Cubano*

- ◆ “Tobacco and sugar are understood more as cultural artefacts than as simple products, just as the national identity is seen as myths in continuous construction, more like static realities. Because of this, the two plants can be considered as metaphorical and structural roots of Cuban national history and identity.”
- ◆ “Commercially the whole world is the market for our tobacco, while our sugar has only a single market. Centripetence and centrifugence. The native versus the foreigner. National sovereignty as against colonial status.” (*Cuban Counterpoint*, 7)
- ◆ TOBACCO= originally Cuban
- ◆ SUGAR= European crop, brought by whites, cultivated by Blacks
  - ◆ Cultivation of both in Cuba represents multifaceted national identity



# Blackness in the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Art, Music, and Expression

- *Cabildos de nación*: black societies of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries which originally provided support for recently arrived Africans & helped decrease likelihood of mass uprisings of slaves by separating them by ethnic identity
  - proved “fundamental in the perpetuation of African cultural forms in Cuba, including language, religious practices, and traditions of music and dance.” (Robin D. Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*, 16)
- Term “folklore” in Cuba synonymous with “Afro-Cuban folklore”
  - Folklorization = subtle form of cultural whitening and de-Africanization
- *Afrocubanismo* (1920s-30s): “the arts of the ‘people without history,’ or at least certain conceptions and representations of them, became fashionable even among the elite.” (3)
- “the mass acceptance of certain forms of black music and dance by Cuban society **did not necessarily imply greater social equality for or empowerment of Afro-Cubans themselves**” (5).
  - Often times white middle-class artists received more attention for their *afrocubanista* art that appropriated Afro-Cuban culture
- Afro-Cuban themes eventually emerged as the most symbolic representation of “*lo cubano*”

# Cuban Son

- Cultural fusion of Hispanic musical & Afro-Cuban rhythmic elements
- Tension between tradition and innovation
- “Son is analyzed as mediating stylistically and ideologically between the cultural practices of working-class Afrocubans and the white and black middle classes.” (Robin D. Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness* (1997), 88)
- Important symbol of national identity; combats American popular music
- Increasing valorization of Afrocuban street art culture/artists due to mass popularization of son

The image displays five musical staves, each representing a different type of son clave rhythm. Each staff begins with a double bar line and a small 'C' time signature. The rhythms are as follows:

- 2:3 RUMBA CLAVE:** A 2-beat first half and a 3-beat second half. The notation shows a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, and a quarter note.
- 3:2 RUMBA CLAVE:** A 3-beat first half and a 2-beat second half. The notation shows a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, and a quarter note.
- 2:3 SON CLAVE:** A 2-beat first half and a 3-beat second half. The notation shows a quarter rest, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, and a quarter note.
- 3:2 SON CLAVE:** A 3-beat first half and a 2-beat second half. The notation shows a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, and a quarter note.
- 6/8 CLAVE:** A 6-beat first half and an 8-beat second half. The notation shows a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, and a quarter note.

Examples of *son clave* rhythm in Cuban music

# Nicolás Guillén

- Nicolás Guillén, Cuban Poet Laureate
  - One of the first writers to incorporate Afro-Cuban musical elements into Cuban literature
  - *Son* rhythms structure his stanzas
  - *Mestizaje* and Blackness as “*lo cubano*” in his poetry
  - *Motivos de son* (1930)
    - Afro-Cuban subject matter/speech
    - African rhythmic elements and musicality of *son*

*Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989)*



# Lydia Cabrera

- ◇ *Cuentos Negros de Cuba* (1936)
  - ◇ Afro-Cuban fiction stories/folktales
- ◇ Lidia Cabrera “struggled to redefine the identity of the otherwise marginalized Afro-Cubans and to reinsert their story into the broader understanding of Cuban identity” (Rodriguez-Mangal, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Cultural Identity*, 3)
  - ◇ sought to retell history of Cuba & culture through imaginative means, wrote ethnographies, fiction based on oral stories heard from Afro-Cubans
  - ◇ Her “writings offer an alternative discourse to the standard, homogenous interpretations of Cuban identity” (4)
  - ◇ “Cabrera destabilizes the gaze of the ethnographer by generating a fictitious space in which Afro-Cubans act as speaking subjects” (21).

*Lydia Cabrera (1899-1991)*





*The Jungle* (1943)

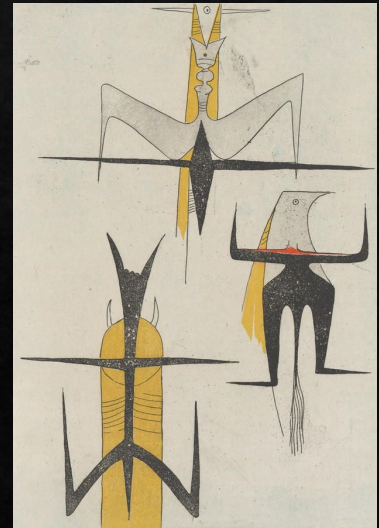
# Wilfredo Lam

- ◆ • Influence of Cubism/Surrealism (European) in his art as well as Afro-Cuban musicality, natural elements, and tropical scenes
- ◆ • Challenging Western construction of “the primitive” while still acknowledging the reality of Cuba’s colonial legacy

*Wilfredo Lam* (1902-1982)



*Dolor de España* (1938)



*Birds*  
(1959)  
In RISD  
Museum

# Blackness in the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Politics and Social Identity

- Leaders of political parties saw racial equality as an achievement of the war for independence and not as a goal requiring further social/political action
  - Denies and minimizes existence of the “race” problem
- “Blacks could not rise against their white brothers who had fought to end slavery in the island” (De La Fuente, *A Nation For All* (2001), 27-28)
  - Anyone who brought up race and tried to confront racial discrimination was portrayed as an “instigator of racial violence”
- In Cuban society: Blackness= backwardness; Africanness= savagery
  - Anthropologic studies used to justify inferiority of Blacks
  - A Cuba “for all” had to be as white as possible

# Blackness in the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Politics and Social Identity, cont.

- The nationalist ideology of racial fraternity made it difficult to exclude Afro-Cubans from the polity, but it also made it possible to delegitimize any attempt at racially defined political mobilization
- PIC (Partido Independiente de Color) called “racist” because it put race over national identity
  - Crushed by white repression
- Blacks still barred from political participation and leadership
  - Their social subordination seen as a result of their own failure to take advantage of the opportunities of the egalitarian republic
- Political parties fought over Black support and who was actually helping the Afro-Cuban cause
  - In reality, political parties cared more about scoring the Black vote than achieving racial equality

# Race, Racism, and the Cuban Revolution (1959)

- ◆ Benefits of Cuban Revolution for Afro-Cuban community
  - ◆ Outlawed discrimination
    - ◆ Discrimination= anti-Cuban anti-Revolutionary
  - ◆ Desegregation of schools and public places
  - ◆ Massive literacy campaign
    - ◆ Nationalization of education
  - ◆ Blackness became essential part of *lo Cubano*
    - ◆ Afro-Cubans became important cultural symbols (anti-bourgeoisie)
- ◆ Negative effects of Revolution on Afro-Cuban community
  - ◆ Belief that Revolution “ended” racism
    - ◆ “colorblind society” (a myth)
    - ◆ Official silence on race
      - ◆ Bringing up race was a threat to Cuban unity and unnecessary
      - ◆ Perpetuated racism and facilitated its reproduction
  - ◆ Afro-Cuban religious expression could only be private
    - ◆ Seen as “primitive” and a threat to Revolution’s success





# Blackness Through the Lens of Cuban Filmmakers

Nicolás Guillén Landrián



(1938-2003)

Sara Gómez



(1942-1974)

# Nicolás Guillén Landrián

- Afro-Cuban filmmaker who focused his view on the “Black view” (*mirada negra*)
  - Deep empathy on part of creator for the subjects of his art
  - Afro-Cuban subjects look directly at camera in intimate communication with viewer
  - Emphasizes the humanity and personhood of Afro-Cubans
- Documentaries center upon daily life and activities of Afro-Cuban population
  - Loved the beauty of the island and its inhabitants
- His work did not “fit the mold” of acceptable revolutionary artistic expresión
  - Accused of being counterrevolutionary and given electroshock therapy
  - Films heavily censored by government



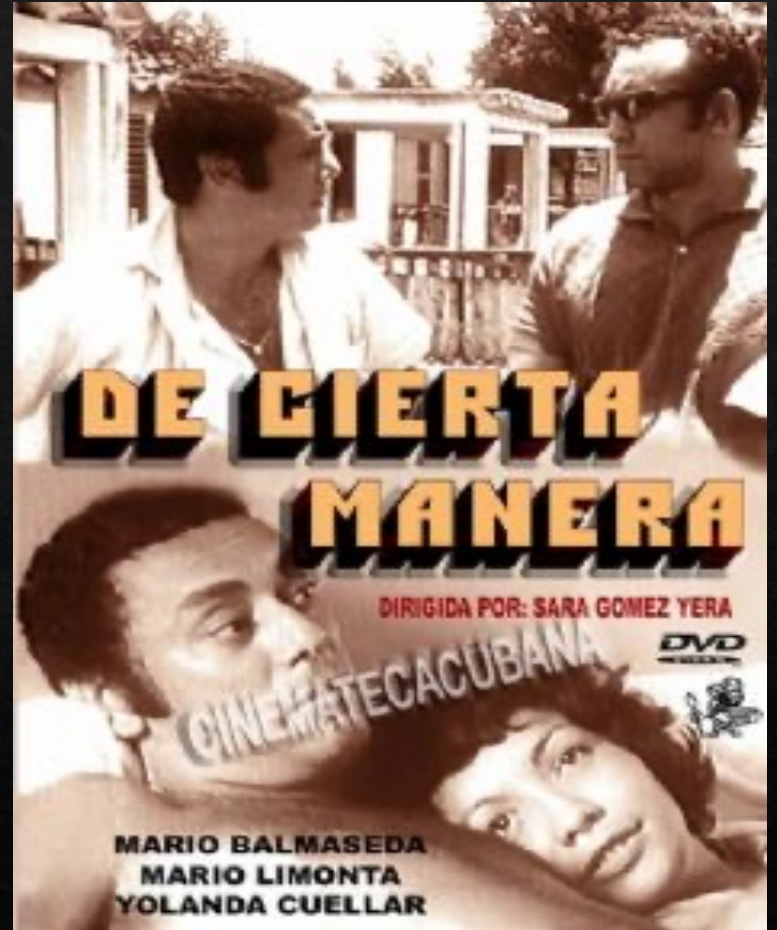
“Coffea Arábica” (1968)



“Los del baile” (1965)

# Sara Gómez

- ◇ First woman filmmaker of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art & Industry (ICAIC)
- ◇ Challenged the racism and sexism of Cuban society in the 1960's
  - ◇ Demonstrated that social equality was not “won” by the Revolution
- ◇ Challenged the Revolution to live up to its feminist and antiracist goals
  - ◇ Identified unfulfilled promises made to Afro-Cubans by Revolution
- ◇ Emphasizes the role of the Afro-Cuban individual in making social change
  - ◇ The Revolution does not generate change—the people do
- ◇ Many of her works censored by government



*De Cierta Manera* (1977)

# Afro-Cuban Music Post-Revolution

- Afro-Cuban Jazz

- “a mixture of conventional jazz harmonies with the driving rhythms of the Cuban *son*” (Raul A. Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, viii)
- Fusion of US and Cuba’s own jazz revolutions
  - US: jazz moves away from commercialism
    - No longer tied to dancing
  - Cuba: music evolves to appeal more to dancers
- *Sabor* is to Afro-Cuban music as *swing* is to jazz
- Israel “Cachao” López and Arsenio Rodríguez
  - Cachao
    - Father of Cuban *descarga* movement (improvisational jam sessions)
  - Arsenio Rodríguez
    - Revolutionized the *son* and created *son montuno*
      - Incorporated Afro-Cuban religious ritual music into *son*



Israel “Cachao” López (1918-2008)



Arsenio Rodríguez (1911-1970)

# Afro-Cuban Jazz

- ◇ Mario Bauzá
  - ◇ Fused African-American big-band with traditional Cuban rhythms to create Afro-Cuban jazz
- ◇ Francisco Raúl Gutiérrez Grillo (“Machito”)
  - ◇ Conductor of Machito and his Afro-Cubans (Bauzá = musical director)
- ◇ Chano Pozo
  - ◇ Afro-Cuban dancer/pop music composer/drummer
  - ◇ Worked with African-American jazz artist Dizzy Gillespie
- ◇ Ramón “Mongo” Santamaría
  - ◇ Helped preserve and develop Afro-Cuban drumming styles
- ◇ Buena Vista Social Club
  - ◇ Small band of elderly Cuban musicians formed in 1990s to revive music of pre-Revolution Cuba



*Mario Bauzá (1911-1993)*



*Chano Pozo (1915-1948)*



*Mongo Santamaría (1917-2003)*



*Machito (1909-1984)*



*Buena Vista Social Club*



*Bebo Valdés (1918-2013)*

# Afro-Cuban Jazz, cont.

## ◆ Irakere

◆ Afro-Cuban jazz group formed in 1973 by **Chucho Valdés** featuring **Arturo Sandoval** and **Paquito D’Rivera**

◆ Utilizes wide variety of Afro-Cuban folkloric percussion instruments

## ◆ Chucho Valdés

◆ Son of **Bebo Valdés**, famous Cuban pianist who helped found Latin Jazz and brought Afro-Cuban sacred rhythms to popular dance music



*Paquito D’Rivera (b. 1948)*



*Chucho Valdés (b. 1941)*



*Arturo Sandoval (b. 1949)*



Chico y Rita (2011) by Fernando Trueba  
Animated love story about two Afro-Cuban  
musicians, from Havana to New York and  
beyond



# Afro-Cuban Artistic Expression Today

- ◇ San Isidro Movement (based in Havana)
  - ◇ Founded in 2018 by **Luis Manuel Otero Alcantara**, Cuban Performance Artist
  - ◇ Movement of artists, poets, professors, musicians, and ordinary Cubans who denounce government measures that limit freedom of expression
- ◇ Orishas
  - ◇ Cuban Hip-Hop group founded in 1999
  - ◇ Name refers to deities of Afro-Cuban religion, Yoruba
- ◇ “Patria y Vida” (2021)
  - ◇ Song pioneered by **Yotuel** (member of Orishas) along with duo **Gente de Zona** and **Descemer Bueno**
  - ◇ Denounces repression by government, expresses discontent with nation’s current state, and calls for action and change
    - ◇ Has elicited great upset with Cuban Communist party
      - ◇ Government officials use racist language to combat artists’ influence

# *¡Patria y Vida!*





Thank You!