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LO AFROCUBANO: EXPLORING AFRO-CUBAN CULTURE IN MUSIC, LITERATURE, & ART, PRE- & POST-CUBAN REVOLUTION



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Abstract

After the abolition of slavery in Cuba in 1886, Black Cubans struggled for equality and a place in a White-dominated society. The twentieth century brought about a deeper exploration of Afro-Cuban culture and identity through several forms of art. Despite the promise of racial equality guaranteed by Fidel Castro at the dawn of the Cuban Revolution, conversations about racial identity were silenced. This study delves into the music, literature, and art of twentieth century Afro-Cuban artists, notably poet Nicolás Guillén, painter Wilfredo Lam, and filmmakers Nicolás Guillén Landrián and Sara Gómez, examining how they used the arts to represent their identity. The project compares the representation of Blacks and Blackness in Cuban society before and during Fidel Castro's revolution and demonstrates how Afro-Cuban artists contested the ideal of a raceless national identity, promoted by the socialist government. The art, music, film, and literature of Afro-Cubans in the 20th century offer crucial insight into the Afro-Cuban identity, and have been integral to the struggle against discrimination, injustice, and the threat of erasure Afro-Cubans have suffered since the birth of the Cuban nation.

Historical Context

Wars of Independence (1868-1878) and abolition of slavery (1886)

- Blacks made up 1/3rd of Cuban population by 1840s
- Blacks fought with Whites against Spanish rule in Wars of Independence
- Formation of New Republic could not discount Black/Mulatto Cubans who fought for freedom
- Birth of Cuban nationalism
 - the New Republic viewed as a **raceless, egalitarian society**
 - Cuban identity supercedes race**
- Racial equality assumed to have been achieved by Wars of Independence
 - notion of Black inferiority persisted

New Republic, Pre-Revolution (1898-1959)

- Afro-Cubanismo* movement of 1920s-30s
 - White Cubans appropriating Black art
 - Folklorization (cultural whitening) of Afro-Cuban cultural elements and practices
- Cuban *son* combined of African and Hispanic musical elements becomes powerful symbol to combat American cultural domination
- Afro-Cuban themes emerged as most symbolic representation of the Cuban identity
 - yet still did not mean greater social equality for Blacks
- Blacks still suffered social subordination and lack of political authority

Cuban Revolution (ca. 1959)

Pros of Revolution for Afro-Cuban population:

- Discrimination outlawed and public spaces desegregated
- Massive literacy campaign ensured all Afro-Cubans were educated
- Blackness became a representation of the Cuban identity

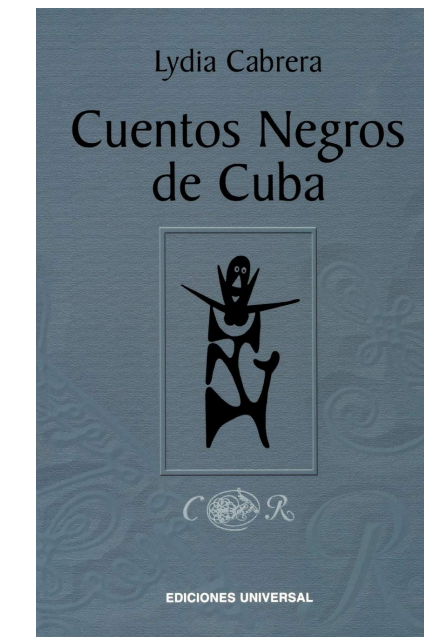
Cons of Revolution for Afro-Cuban population:

- "Colorblind" society in which discussion of race/racism was taboo
- Racism persisted and flourished under the surface
- Afro-Cuban religious expression and cultural art forms (i.e. drumming) outlawed during regime
 - seen as "primitive" and a threat to Revolution
- All art/cultural expression had to serve the state and socialist agenda

Modern-Day Cuba (21st century)

- San Isidro Movement begun in 2018 by Luis Manuel Otero Alcantara gathers artists and Cubans who protest government limitation on freedom of expression
- "Patria y Vida" (song) released in 2021 by Afro-Cuban artist Yotuel and groups Gente de Zona and Descemer Bueno denounces government repression and calls for action
 - has faced racist backlash from Cuban government

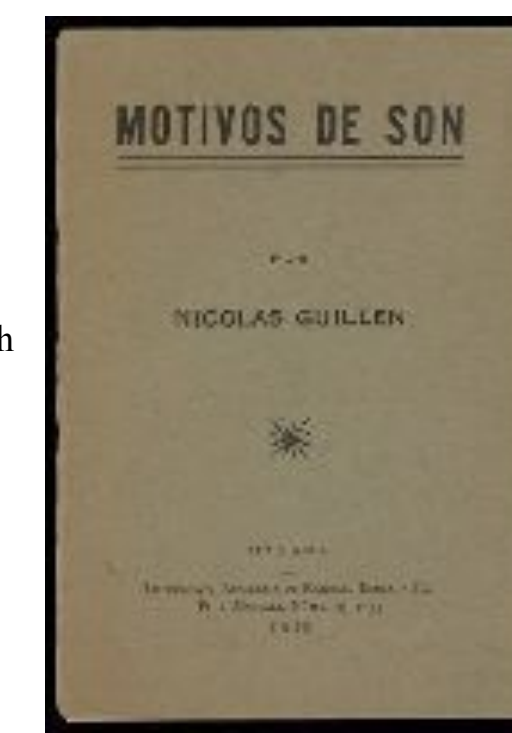
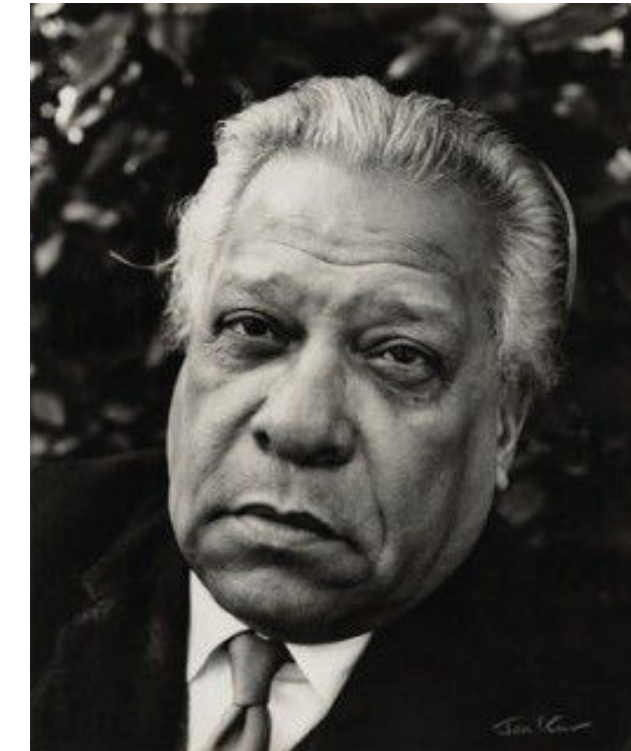
Afro-Cuban Literature: Lydia Cabrera (1899-1991)



Left: Lydia Cabrera (elnuevoherald.com); Right: *Cuentos Negros de Cuba* (1936) (amazon.com)

- White Cuban anthropologist and writer
 - used White Privilege to bring Afro-Cuban identity into the spotlight
- 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" (Rodríguez-Mangal, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Cultural Identity*, 3)
- Sought to retell history of Cuba & culture through imaginative means and 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" (Rodríguez-Mangal, 4)
- "Cabrera destabilizes the gaze of the ethnographer by generating a fictitious space in which Afro-Cubans act as speaking subjects" (Rodríguez-Mangal, 21)

Afro-Cuban Literature: Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989)



Left: Nicolás Guillén (National Portrait Gallery); Right: *Motivos de Son* (1930) (Yale University Library); Above: Transcription of Cuban *son* rhythm (lumbbeat.com)

- Cuban Poet Laureate
- One of the first writers to incorporate Afro-Cuban musical elements into Cuban literature
- Cuban *Son* (uniquely Cuban synthesis of African and Spanish rhythmic/harmonic elements) structures his stanzas
 - Fusion of White and Black societies through *son*
- Mestizaje and Blackness as "lo cubano" in his poetry
- Motivos de son* (1930)
 - Afro-Cuban subject matter
 - Influence of Langston Hughes and the Negritude Movement
 - African rhythmic elements and musicality of *son*

Afro-Cuban Visual Art: Wilfredo Lam (1902-1982)



Left to right: Wilfredo Lam; *The Jungle* (1943); *Madame Lumumba* (1938) (wilfredolam.net)

- Afro-Cuban and Chinese-descent painter
- 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

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Afro-Cuban Music: Afro-Cuban Jazz



Left to right: Israel "Cachao" Lopez (1918-2008) (Youtube); Arsenio Rodriguez (1911-1970) (havanatimes.org); Mario Bauzá (1911-1993) (Youtube); Chano Pozo (1915-1948) (Youtube); Mongo Santamaría (1917-2003) (vintagemusic.fm)

- "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
- Israel "Cachao" López, father of Cuban *descarga* movement (improvisational jam sessions)
- Arsenio Rodriguez revolutionized the *son*, created *son montuno*, and incorporated Afro-Cuban religious ritual music into son
- Mario Bauzá fused African-American big-band with traditional Cuban rhythms to create Afro-Cuban jazz
- 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

Afro-Cuban Film: Nicolás Guillén Landrián (1938-2003)



Left to right: Nicolás Guillén Landrián (80grados.net); *Coffee Arabiga* (1968); *Los del baile* (1965) (Youtube)

- 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 expression
 - Accused of being counterrevolutionary and given electroshock therapy
 - Films heavily censored by government



Afro-Cuban Film: Sara Gómez (1942-1974)



- First woman filmmaker of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art & Industry (ICAIC)
- Challenged the racism and sexism of Cuban society in the 1960s
 - 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



Left to right: Sara Gómez (festivalcinemomujeres.com); *De Cierta Manera* (1977) (filmlinc.org)

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