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## From Bush to Stage: The Shifting Performing Geography of Haitian Rara and Cuban Gagá

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### *Introduction*

It started as a faint rumble in the far distance, but with each advance the multilayered sonic tapestry grew more intense, ushering the arrival of one of Cuba's oldest Rara/Gagá bands,<sup>1</sup> *Grupo Barranca*. The animated cast of characters with bodies donning brilliantly colored fabric strips and bedecked with ritual beads as spiritual armor, descended upon the crowd of dignitaries assembled to welcome then Haitian president Jean Bertrand Aristide during his visit to Cuba in June 2000. With each crack of the whip and sounding of the *lanbi* (conch shell), the melodious cadence of the *baccines* (bamboo trumpet) and *tambourin* (portable drum head) increased in tempo. The descendants of Haitian field laborers stomped their feet and danced joyously to the rapid *petwo-kongo* rhythms for the delighted mass of spectators.

As they marched through the lobby of one of Santiago de Cuba's premier hotels, brandishing the ritual flags of their *Iwa* (spirits) and native homeland, they chanted, "*Aysien Nou Ye*" (We Are Haitians), thus proclaiming their sense of belonging to a place they have never seen, but one that has shaped their existence and sensibilities for generations. In response, the Haitian president looked overwhelmed by what unfolded in front of him, with a smile on his face that bespoke the tone of such a momentous encounter.

Removed from the locality of the Haitian countryside and urban thoroughfares to the Cuban *bateyes* (agricultural outposts) and then to the city streets and stages of Santiago de Cuba, Gagá is one of the myriad cultural forms that now participates in several symbolic systems and performative contexts. Gagá became part of the performance geography of Oriente (eastern Cuba) with the influx of labor migrants to Cuba during the early twentieth-century.<sup>2</sup> Initially cloaked in secrecy and maintained exclusively by *Vodú sociétés*,<sup>3</sup> Gagá remained relatively invisible as a national cultural form. Its initial marginality in many ways historically mirrored the placement of Haitians and their descendants in both the spatial and social landscapes of eastern Cuba.<sup>4</sup> However, since the mid 1970s, there have been concerted efforts by state officials to unearth and exhibit subaltern expressions.<sup>5</sup> *Casa del Caribe*, one of the leading cultural institution in Cuba dedicated to researching the traditions and historical connections between Cuba and the Caribbean, has through its programming been pivotal in popularizing and disseminating knowledge about the Haitian presence on the island. In turn, Gagá has become increasingly enrolled in state-sponsored folkloric spectacles for locals and tourists alike and is the latest signifier of Santiago's distinctive pluri-cultural identity and pan-Caribbean heritage.

What makes Grupo Barranca's performance significant for our current consideration is not so much that Gagá is chosen as the emblematic icon of Haitian identity in Cuba, or placed in a context that seemingly reduces or at best neutralizes its oppositional potentialities. Instead, its importance lies in the fact that, for generations of displaced Haitians living in Cuba, cultural performances like Gagá provided a tangible link to an identity that had been devalued within the society. In the once insular rural environments of Oriente, festive traditions like Gagá served as a marker distinguishing the diverse communities of Antillean immigrant laborers and, in the words of a Barranca resident, "joined us over here [in Cuba] with those over there [in Haiti] as one Haitian people."<sup>6</sup> More poignantly, the overt carnivalesque facade of Gagá also provided a suitable cloak for the more demonized ritual practices associated with Vodú.<sup>7</sup> Today, the expanding performance networks and contexts provide venues for the "performance of visibility" (Thompson 2007) beyond the confines of the *bateyes*. They also provide an opportunity for those of Haitian descent to proclaim publicly an ethnic identity that is often denied within prevailing understandings of *cubanidad* (Cubanness).

Sonjah Stanley Niaah (2008) utilizes the term *performance geography* to elaborate on the intersections of cultural geography and performance studies in order to trace the shared

spatialities and “common genealogy” of Black Atlantic performance cultures. Beyond examining the continuities of African diasporic musical and performance genres, Stanley Niaah explores “the way people, living in particular locations, give meaning [to their social worlds] through performance practices” (344). I am likewise invested in mapping the contours of performances as they traverse geographical locales and social/spatial contexts. However, unlike the majority of scholarship on migration and cultural displacement across the Black Atlantic, which focuses on metropolitan urban spaces (see Gilroy 1993; Hall 1995; Ho and Nurse 2005), this essay examines the circulation of culture in hybrid rural locations that exist on the peripheries of global capitalism. Moreover, by using a reconstituted peasant ritual as a lens to analyze contemporary cultural politics at both the level of the state and local subaltern communities, this essay examines how Haitian forms are situated in Cuba’s folkloric imaginary, and also assesses the motivating factors and agendas that animate such cultural productions.

## ***Haitian Rara: The Socio-Cultural Roots of Gagá Cubano***

Rara is one of the most subversive popular expressions practiced by the economically deprived peasant and urban classes of Haiti. During the Lenten period, ritual activities are suspended in the Vodou temples and diverted to the Rara bands, which enact rites in auspicious sites along their nocturnal pilgrimages. Structured as a public ritual, Rara processions, with their casts of characters,<sup>8</sup> navigate the Haitian landscape, enveloping all within their reach. They provide public platforms for the honoring of the spirits and for the powerless masses to broadcast coded and symbolically potent messages about their social realities. As a festive form, Rara marries religious rituals, politics, exuberant dances, songs, and music, in a six-week Lenten street festival that begins on Ash Wednesday in Vodou temples across the country and culminates the week of Easter.<sup>9</sup> The celebrations climaxed with the burning of an effigy, known locally as a *fwif* (Jew) or devil, but this practice was banned in Haiti in the mid-1970s.<sup>10</sup> The aesthetic, ritual, and socio-political features work together to give Rara its complex multidimensionality as a cultural performance that merges the festival and sacred arts. Within the context of Haiti, Rara is used as an oppositional force that counters the Catholic orthodoxy and social inequities of Haiti in its reclamation of public space for the display of Vodou rites and carnivalesque revelry (McAlister 2002). Through its spectacular performance of oral dexterity, which oscillates between secular and sacred registers, Rara becomes a critical platform for the materially and socially disadvantaged to negotiate their place within asymmetrical structures of power. Thus within this festive form revelers express an emancipatory ethos, albeit in the temporality of its enactment.

According to Micheal Largey (2000), “Rara bands follow a pattern in their nightly parades resembling the 19<sup>th</sup>-century insurrection/coup d’etat. Like the regional armies of aspiring Haitian generals, Rara bands move through the streets looking to pick up supporters for their musical ‘platform’” (244). These songs, and specifically the particular soundscape, go beyond their immediate local environment, however, for in many ways they become the aural, or what Elizabeth McAlister (2002) has called the “sonic flags” (247), linking the multiple

communities of Haitians on the island with those who celebrate this festive form in diverse diasporic communities. As Rara migrates with the flows of Haitians that settle in neighboring Cuba, the cultural practices, iconography, and aesthetic principles of the form are transplanted, reconfigured, and represented as a means not only to recuperate the past, but also to serve as a key agent in the collective assertion of a Haitian identity on Cuban soil, and later operating within an increasingly expansive folkloric economy.

## ***The Early Formation of Gagá Societies in Rural Cuba***

In their 1988 study of the Haitian settlement Caidije, a batey in the old provincial area of Camagüey, Cuban ethnographers Jesus Guancho and Denis Moreno contend that Gagá bands were started fairly soon after a population of Haitian migrants settled in the batey. As an example, in 1926, three years after the community of Caidije was founded, the primarily male residents created a Gagá society that had been performing this celebratory and communal rite consistently for over eighty years.

The organizational structure of the Gagá ensemble resembles the Haitian *société*, or spiritual collectivity, connected to an *ounfó*, or religious house/temple. In her explication of the importance and interdependency of the *société* to the *oungan/mambo* (Vodou priest or priestess) and the religious structure of Vodou, Maya Deren (1953) maintains that:

The term refers to all the people connected with a specific *hounfor* and defines them as a communal entity. While the *hounfor* itself is referred to in the name of the *houngan*, it is understood as being under the sponsorship of the *société*, which has a separate name. The *société* may even include members who live in town and attend only the most important ceremonies, but upon whose assistance the priest can rely should he need to raise money for an expensive ceremony, to arrange transportation, to be advised on building, etc. As a collective unit at the base of the religious structure, the *société* is represented by two heavily embroidered ceremonial flags. Carried by two flag bearers, these banners are used to salute the loa and as a mark of respect to any distinguished guest at ceremonies. When one arrives at a ceremony, the accepted greeting is: *Bonjour, la société*. (154)

Following an analogous structure, the *sociétés* that developed in Oriente mirror the system of reciprocity and exchange found in their Haitian counterpart. While the social networks created out of these collective units are considerably smaller, they function in a similar fashion as they helped to define and solidify the community of Haitians and their descendants. They also were a centralizing force, bringing disparate communities of Haitians together under the banner of Vodú (i.e. the Cuban version of Haitian Vodou). By extension, they have historically helped these displaced migrants reconstitute, develop, and reformulate their religious and socio-cultural worlds, while serving as a catalyst for the maintenance of a Haitian sensibility and consciousness that was routinely activated through collective ritualizing.<sup>11</sup>

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Initially “a hermetic and laborious brotherhood that few manage[d] to penetrate” (Montero 1992, 9), Gagá societies were further fortified by their links to the Masonic Order, which functioned as a meeting ground for oungans and served as a practical cloak to the more vilified rites associated with Vodú.<sup>12</sup> Fraternal organizations, like the Lodge, were legitimate and established institutions in the socio-cultural and political scene of Santiago from as early as the late 1700s, after they were founded by the French émigrés class.<sup>13</sup> That Haitian migrants in the 20th century joined the Masonic Orders soon after settling in Cuba bespeaks the continuation of a cultural practice, but more so, it reveals the strategy employed by oungans to shield their religion and to acquire power and legitimacy among their kinsmen and Cubans alike. Through the ritual guise of the Masonic rites and salutations, these mobile processions created a space for Haitian migrants to conduct mystical negotiations and fulfill sacred contracts as they paraded the countryside year after year or until the *promesas* (sacred pledges or promises made to the spirits) were satisfied.

Over time Gagá became imbricated into the social life of the bateyes and functioned as a source of community identification and solidarity from as early as 1915.<sup>14</sup> As an annual commemorative rite, Gagá functioned as a central feature of the liturgical calendar, thus punctuating the otherwise monotonous flow of agricultural labor. Like many traditional masquerade forms found in the Afro-Atlantic world, Gagá functioned as a collective ceremonial reprieve from an otherwise arduous work schedule. In fact the shortened time frame of the festival correlated with the one-week respite laborers were given during Holy Week or *Semana Santa*, which also coincided with the height of the *zafra*, or harvest period. Symbolically, Gagá became enveloped within a liberatory ethos, as performers bracketed the realities of life in the bateyes through releasing into the communal spirit of celebration, ancestral veneration, and social detachment. Yet Gagá bands not only followed prescribed Vodú rites, they also mirrored the structures of power and social hierarchy in the Cuban batey. Similar to the Dominican Republic, where Gagá bands are also found, these community-centered associations, as June Rosenberg (1979) argues, “offer[ed] an identity which [was] far removed from the possibilities of these individuals...as the structure of the group reflect[ed] the values of the larger society” (203). As an example, in Cuba, as in the Dominican Republic, the maximum leader of the band was on occasion called a *dueño/a* meaning “master.” The term was used to designate the sugar boss, and hence the locus of power and prestige in the bateyes. With the appropriation of the title, the name came also to refer to a Vodú priest (*oungan* or *manbo*) of great repute who was a spiritual director of the *serviteurs* (devotees) and revelers and a proprietor of his/her own Gagá society and band. Even with the adoption of a Spanish title, the sacred dimensions of the form and the primacy of the Haitian god of war, Papa Ogou, remained evident.

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Photo by Yanique Hume.

One event I witnessed in March 2003, which throws the hybrid cultural world of Gagá in stark relief, involved the mock battle between bands and feasting/feting of Ogou in the community of Barranca. A group of drummers and family members from Santiago de Cuba with ties to the batey came to participate in the opening rites of offering foods to the ancestors and rehearsing songs and dances in preparation for the climactic procession, which was to take place on the day before Easter Sunday.<sup>15</sup> On the night of the journey, the band wove its way through fields of cane before approaching train tracks off in the distance. Train tracks are auspicious sites because they are deemed to manifest the greatness of Ogou's power as owner of metal and protector of those who work with or manipulate metal implements. They also stand as a symbol of the transshipment of sugar cane from the bateyes to the town, and hence function as a figurative condensation of the livelihood of these field laborers cum performers. As the band danced towards the tracks, another band made its way toward them, waving its ritual flags or banners of affiliations to the revered Haitian *Iwa*, Ogou. With their heads and waist tied in his sacred red cloth, both bands flanked either side of the train tracks. With the pulsating sounds of whistles, which initiated the building of a bonfire, revelers began their magnificent display of skill and mastery of the swords, rendering the cold glistening steel brilliantly and fluidly as they hurled them through the air. The spectacle soon turned into a possession-performance as the assembled congregants/revelers were taken over by the powerful warrior spirit. They threw jabs at each other and sliced through the sky as if clearing bush. The revelers charged through the cane fields that run along either side of the track, slashing cane trash before returning to the center of the ritual space where they slapped their machetes onto the metal rail lines before turning the tip of their blades against themselves. The *majó*<sup>16</sup> machetes (machete twirlers) took turns at passing the blades across their tongues, faces, abdomens, and arms. The frenzied movement climaxed to a crescendo as they engaged in mock battle around the blazing bonfire. To mark the end of the rite, the *baterí* (musical ensemble)<sup>17</sup> stopped playing and the *majó* machetes responded by turning their blades face down into the earth along the length of the train track. Each *majó* poured libations of rum where their blades pierce the earth and to the cardinal points. As the collective circled the line of sabers, they were sprayed with rum from the pierced lips of the oungans, and then proceeded

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on with their journey, stomping their feet and swaying their hips before disappearing into the night.

Within this ritual, multiple narratives converged, along with diverse spiritual worlds, thus throwing into relief the inherent dynamism of this festive form. Outside of the geographic territory of Haiti, Gagá performers systematically borrow and draw on the rich spiritual world of their adopted home, incorporating some of the symbols associated with other sacred complexes. The inherent syncretic nature thus points to what scholar Margarite Fernández Olmos (2000) has identified as “a secondary type of syncretism, one between (ex) colonized peoples” (273). Foregrounded in the rite around the train tracks is the pivotal place in which Ogun is situated within the ritual landscape of Cuba, where the boundaries of his spiritual identity bleed across Vodú and the Yoruba-derived Santería/Lucumi tradition. As a powerful African warrior who brandishes a machete as his spiritual tool and creative devise, Ogou/Ogun initiates war and clears the fields to usher into being civilization and modern industry. In this way, Ogun becomes linked both to positive and negative deeds. As such, he represents the African ideal of complementarity, whereby a destroyer-creator binary operates within a broader imaginary of social transformation.<sup>18</sup> The iconographic emblems of the machete and sacred banners that are ritually *mises en activite* (put into action) also point to Ogou’s metaphorical link between religion and the military, which gave rise to the birth of the Haitian nation. Religion scholar Karen McCarthy Brown (1989) writes that “[t]he military-political complex has provided the primary niche for Ogou in Haiti” (71). Within the diasporic enclaves, this embodied memory of Haiti becomes activated through rites for Ogou, which references these two interlocking forces. Repeatedly, younger and older men spoke of their affinity to Ogou’s revolutionary and transformative power. According to one performer, “Papa Ogou is our most important spirit. He brought freedom to our ancestors in Haiti and he fights for our freedom in Cuba...he lives in all of us, he is in our blood.”<sup>19</sup> After probing this comment further with other performers, it became apparent that Gagá in the bateys became in some ways a festive ode to this god of war. In collectively embodying the gestures and agile movements of this divine warrior, the remembrance of Haiti and the revolutionary struggle for freedom is repeatedly brought to memory as an on-going process. Ogou’s transformative power is continually recalled and harnessed in the collective bodily labor of the performers, as they, too, in their performance and everyday lives toil for a greater sense of self-actualization.

The communal efforts of the majó machete with the accompaniment of the ritual chorus of queens and mobile orchestra ignite Ogou’s energy through their collective spiritual work and discipline. The flags and sabers become condensed symbols of potent power, or what is known in Haiti as *pwen* (power point). As mnemonic devices, they call to the fore this history and serve as the channels through which they cleanse and recharge the earth at the very place where Ogou’s power is concentrated (i.e. a railroad track), a numinous site in Cuba where diverse spiritual worlds collide. Through their highly choreographed performance, they reclaim the land that has historically been the source of not only their labor but also their oppression and, in turn, recast it as the sacred domain of the

Iwa. By extension, they harness the might and authority of Ogou to enact a power that they do not ordinarily have.



Photo by Yanique Hume.

The *haitiano-cubano* (Haitian-Cuban) communities, mostly dispersed across the eastern provinces from Camaguey to Holguin, are unlike their Haitian diasporic counterparts residing in metropolitan centers, who are embedded in well-established transnational networks and social fields.<sup>20</sup> While the recent relaxation of travel restrictions for Cuban nationals may shift this reality, the prohibitive socio-economic climate makes the continuous circulation of cultural products, peoples and ideas between the two Caribbean nations relatively minimal.<sup>21</sup> Thus the diasporic subjectivity constructed in Cuba has been articulated and sustained primarily through collective memory, guarded traditions, and cultural inventions, as opposed to an identity forged through consistent transnational flows. As a case in point, the repetitious sequencing of events that mark Gagá festivities, including the feasting of ancestral kin, days of rehearsing songs and dances for the journey across the bateyes, the conducting of ceremonial offerings at auspicious sites and within the family compound, and the final act of burning an effigy and ingesting the ashes in a scared alcoholic brew, became part of the naturalized rhythm that defined this seasonal festive form. There has been a maintenance, amplification and creation of some characters, most notably the *majó table*, which is no longer part of the repertoire in Haiti. Similarly, the formidable skills of the *majó machete*—a competency honed over generations of cutting cane—have usurped the primacy placed on the traditional Haitian *majó jonc*, or baton twirlers. Meanwhile, the *majó rua diable*, with his multilayered strips of cloth reminiscent of a traditional *egugun*-like masquerade, has been added in as the spiritual protectors of the band, who deflects negative energies with his

twirling cloth.

Although deviation from the cultural script concerning the sequencing of the ritual events would occasion criticism, the inherent hybridity of the form manifests itself nonetheless. This is perhaps most evident in the local lingua franca used in the ceremony, as in everyday life, which slips seamlessly between Kreyol and Spanish. It is further expressed in the worshiping of divinities beyond those found in the Vodou pantheon, and indeed feasting their *lwas* on either the same days or seasons dedicated to honoring those associated with the more popular religious traditions found in Cuba. Further illuminating this confluence of cultures is the fact that most *voduisants* and ritual leaders are usually adept in *Espiritismo* (Spiritism), as well, and have created altar spaces in their domestic and ritual environments to represent their expansive sacred universe. The inter-cultural participation and collapsing of diverse spiritual worlds is also evident in the rural drum-dance fetes, known locally as *bembé de sao*, which are a central feature of the social and ritual lives of these communities formed by descendants of Haitians and Cuban peasants.

Vodou and, by extension, the rites associated with Gagá proved particularly adaptive to the Cuban socio-religious environment. Haitiano-cubanos were able to reconstruct their sacred expressions and practices in part because of the isolation and, hence, protection the forested rural regions afforded them. More poignantly, the similar vegetation and fortification provided by the physical environment was further enhanced by the familiar spiritual topography of eastern Cuba. Vodú and Gagá were also able to thrive because they were not institutionalized practices requiring a fixed structure, priesthood, codified practice, or geographical center (see Mintz and Trouillot 1995). Instead, they were able to take root in Cuba because individual priests established religious family networks in the communities they settled and re-established their practices. Gagá leaders collapsed and re-blended the ritual accouterments of several ritual systems, which then served as the sacred armory used by the oungans and other participants to mediate between the gods, the Cuban state, and their new environment. I now turn to the adaptations of the form to the concert stage as part of the annual Festival of Fire, where it has taken on a renewed vibrancy.

### ***Festive Forms and Their Shifting Performance Context***

In his assessment of the shifts in the last few decades within the scholarship on ritual and festive traditions, anthropologist David Guss (2000) maintains that there has been a move away from examining these forms in terms of their discrete place-based cultural specificity and function to that of “relocating festive practice in the sociopolitical reality” of the post-modern era (3-7). The realm of the popular is seen, therefore, not as an uncontaminated sphere of cultural production, but in fact one that participates in ever-expanding semantic fields. Popular cultural expressions are not static constructs, but are informed by processes such as urbanization, migration, tourism, and the global flows and circuits of culture within market-driven economies

(García Canclini 1995; Yúdice 2003; Ho and Nurse 2005). Following this logic, cultural performances are therefore ripe arenas not only to map the ambiguous and contradictory processes through which meaning is made and remade, but likewise to see how identities are refashioned within and across distinct performance frames.

From as early as the 1960s, Haitian expressive forms began to enter the repertoire of professional folkloric troupes in Santiago de Cuba and later gained more visibility through public events such as Carnival<sup>22</sup> and the Festival of Caribbean Culture (*Fiesta del Fuego*). With the formation of the *Conjunto Folklórico de Oriente* (founded in 1959) and its offshoot, *Ballet Folklórico Cutumba* (founded in 1960), formal channels for the inclusion of Afro-Franco and Haitian expressive forms (e.g. ritual/social dances and music traditions) were institutionalized. However, a much longer history of cross-cultural entanglements with the Afro-Cuban population in eastern Cuba existed and thus reveals how the cultural influences of Saint Domingue and, later, Haiti were intimately interwoven into the cultural tapestry of Santiago de Cuba and Oriente more generally (see Bettelheim 1998, 2001). As an example, the creolized music and dance tradition, Tumba Francesa and Tajona,<sup>23</sup> declared by UNESCO in 2003 to be a *Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, was forged in the *cafetales*, or coffee plantations, in the hills of Oriente during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and embodies one of the oldest and most tangible links to the Afro-Franco-Haitian heritage of Cuba's eastern provinces. During Carnival processions in Santiago de Cuba, members of the only remaining tumba society, Santa Catalina de Rici (founded in 1902), or Pompadour, as they are known locally, parade with stately and aristocratic finesse in front of local and foreign spectators. Outside of this heightened festive environment, society members present the imitative French court dances merged with African syncopated drum rhythms to more modest tourist audiences who visit their cultural center in Guantánamo.

## ***Gagá on the Concert Stage***

While the linear structure of creolized tumba dances<sup>24</sup> was translatable to the concert stage, the incorporation of Gagá within the folkloric repertoire involved a greater investment in making the dances more theatrically accessible. According to former director of the *Conjunto Folklórico de Oriente*, Antonio "Toni" Pérez Martínez:

The dances we witnessed in our trips to the Haitian communities were wild and energetic. We went as a team to see how the dances are performed in the bateyes and to learn directly from the source....These people were not professional dancers....They were field hands who danced as part of their lives. They worked hard, and when they danced, it was as if there was something in them they were trying to release. What we witnessed was raw almost primal energy and strong movements. They were strong rhythms and dances, but they lacked the sophistication needed for the stage....We had to clean it and make it art.<sup>25</sup>

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Photo by Yanique Hume.

In the process of staging Gagá as art, the sacred context and ritual grammars that give meaning to the festive form are reduced to key symbolic identity markers of *haitianidad* (Haitian-ness). The flags, batons, and machetes are no longer amulets of sacred power or linked to specific divinities. Instead, these objects, along with some key characters (e.g. *majo table* and *majo jonc/macete*) become props that distinguish the folkloric form from the more popularized Afro-Cuban religio-dance traditions that have had a much longer history of public staging.<sup>26</sup> Often structured around a linear processional formation, dancers crisscross the stage with the signature wide-legged stomping action that characterizes the grounded earth-bound quality of the dance. While the movements of the legs, sinuous swaying or rotation of the hips, and pulsating arms in an alternating downward pattern remain true to the dance, the spatial demarcations that separate dancers/revelers from the stationary groupings of musicians and chorus belie the original integrative form of the mobile procession. The presentation of performers into distinct areas on the stage, the dominant frontal positioning of the cast of characters, and more linear configuration of their placement creates a clearly defined boundary between spectator/performer—a distinction, which in its original aesthetic context, remains blurred. One of the most characteristic features is displaying the athletic virtuosity of the male dancers. However, in the staged presentation, these feats of athleticism tend to dwarf the women, who are marginalized within the overall composition of the choreography. Moreover, the confidence that is inscribed onto the bodies of the traditional queens through their carriage and long, layered garments, are replaced with outfits that reveal, rather than conceal. To this end, the female body is not positioned as a locus of feminine and spiritual strength, but instead reduced to a sign of the exotic to be observed.<sup>27</sup> The sacred knowledge that women are

deemed to embody within Gagá bands finds no tangible expression on the concert stage. Instead, her sexualized posture is subject to an external gaze that trivializes the primacy of queens within the traditional hierarchy of Gagá bands. Despite the decreasing number of Haitian women migrating to Cuba, the significance of and reverence to the queens was maintained. The sharing of spiritual work between the genders that one witnesses in traditional Gagá performances mirrors the sacred pairing that undergirds the overarching cosmological orientation towards balance in the Vodou religion.<sup>28</sup> The queen's power is thus always in relationship with that of her male counterparts, the *prezidan* (president) and *kolonèl* (colonel), who then assist with the execution of the rites. The title of "queen" bespeaks her *konesans*, or intuitive knowledge and spiritual power. In many respects, the queens of Gagá invoke a regal lineage in the likeness of those linked to the Tajona and Tumba Francesa societies. However, in the staged version of the form she is marked as sexual 'other,' marginalized in the physical space and stripped of any reference to her significant status within the community of ritual adherents.

Further compounding the process of turning sacred rites into spectacle are the elisions that inevitably follow. In many ways the repertoire of Conjunto Folklórico and Cutumba kinesthetically and aurally embody the *ajiacó* stew that Fernando Ortiz offered as a culinary metaphor of *cubanidad* (1949). At the same time, the contextual framework of these forms, as well as the history and socio-cultural and political positioning of Haitian culture in Cuba, are erased. The historical marginalization of Haitians and their descendants are also absent from the corporeal narrative of *cubanidad*. Indeed, the repertoire of Haitian materials presents a visual and performative history of the migratory waves of Franco and Afro-Haitians and the significant cultural contributions made by the distinct groups that entered the island. The issues concerning their social and political marginalization, however, are glossed over with a smile. Certainly, there is a growing appreciation of the diversity of Cuba and, by extension, a disruption of the mulatto imagery that has long identified Cuban culture and national identity. For many state officials in Santiago, including a former anthropologist with Casa del Caribe, José Millet, the cultural traditions in the east of the island are diverse and express "the uniqueness of Santiago as the cultural soul of Cuba." There is also an acknowledgement that "Haiti is central to this history, and we are proud to demonstrate it in our programming."<sup>29</sup> However, while some haitiano-cubanos are thrilled to be gaining greater exposure, others remain ambiguous about questions concerning cultural ownership and the representation of their traditions. As Sylvia Gardes, director of *Mysterie d' Vodou* states, "We have to be careful and make sure that our traditions are represented as they should be....That's why as Haitians we have to also be on stage presenting who we are."<sup>30</sup> While Haitian heritage communities are interested in validating their cultural forms and showcasing the different aspects of their customs publically, they are also concerned that they have had to struggle to maintain their identities in a hostile environment for several decades and hence want to have a say in how their cultural expressions become enveloped in national folkloric spectacles. Gagá is not solely a symbol of haitianidad, it is a lived cultural expression with

sacred roots, a fact that many haitiano-cubanos are keen to guard through their own renditions at more intimate local events that they are developing, as well as in national celebrations.

I am reminded of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) astute critique of national folkloric companies and the tendency to reclassify ritual as art, while at the same time raising questions concerning cultural ownership and difference:

...the proprietary rights to the material [folkloric repertoire performed by national companies] have been transferred from local areas to the "nation," where regional forms are declared national heritage. National troupes typically perform traditions from across the land, no matter what the personal histories of the performers. Since everyone can perform everything and everything belongs to everyone, *differences do not differentiate*. Polygot programs, besides offering variety, generally represent an "imagined community" in which diversity is harmoniously integrated. Difference is reduced to style and decoration, to spice of life. Cultural difference is then praised for the variety and color it adds to an otherwise bland scene. (65; emphasis added)

The question of difference, which folkloric companies attempt to produce through their diverse program, actually serves to dilute its oppositional potential. While I am cognizant of the various implications and dangers of the increased folklorization of Haitian forms, the results are a bit more ambivalent and complex than what is often discussed. Indeed, there are risks in celebrating the superficial harmonious tapestry of cultural differences as they are presented in folkloric performances. Moreover, "valorizing an aesthetic of marginalization" (Ibid., 76) only serves to uphold the status quo and normative readings of culture. It further endorses frivolity, as opposed to encouraging critique and action. But, to dismiss these staged presentations as somehow aberrant and inherently lacking is a bit too reductive, as they do more than entertain. For the audiences that view them, these performances also have multiple meanings and speak to them in a multiplicity of ways. There is a tendency to leave the concerns of the actors and audience out of the equation, when in fact these are the people who will counter this very claim of superficiality.

### ***Casa del Caribe and the Reframing of Cuba's Folkloric Paradigm***

Defining Cuba's "national character" has been a pivotal feature of the discursive practice of the state and its shifting cultural politics. From the advent of tourism campaigns of the 1920s and the ensuing polemic surrounding the revolution of signs in the 1930s, Afro-Cuban cultural expressions were reevaluated as official national signifiers. Moreover, African-derived religions emerged as the identifying marker of Cuba's cultural distinctiveness. Acclaimed Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz reevaluated the maligned image of Cuba's African-derived religions and expressive forms as unique emblems of national cultural distinction.<sup>31</sup> Not to be relegated to the margins, religious expressions were to be reformulated as viable sources of Cuban folklore and popular culture.

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Given the turbulent history of the systematic repression of Afro-Cuban religions (Matibag 1996; Ayorinde 2004), the radical shift from the overt displays of public hostility and, later, ambivalence toward black forms of worship and spirituality to the contemporary preponderance of representations of ritual performances in the streets and on the stage may occasion surprise. However, the consistent appropriation of Afro-Cuban religions, or what Carlos Moore (1988) has identified as “the repository of Cuba’s most powerful cultural distinctiveness” (98), reveals the manner in which these popular forms are fully imbricated within the structure of state power (Routon 2010). With the formation of Cuba’s national folkloric company, a template was set for the future secularization, commoditization, and folklorization of sacred and popular forms.

As a means of combating this trend of de-contextualization, Casa del Caribe inaugurated an alternative approach that attempts to retrieve the teachings, sacred arts, and ritual practice associated with African-derived religions from the margins of “folk practice” to a more central position within intellectual discourse. Through its annual Festival of Caribbean Culture with its attendant program of events, including symposia on popular culture and religion and the staging of rituals in curated presentations, Casa attempts to re-contextualize Cuba’s diverse religious worlds. According to one of the Institute’s founding scholars and previous director, Joel James Figarola, “Religion provides a window through which to examine the complex multidimensionality of an individual and collective sense of identity. It also helps us locate Cuba’s pervasive African-ness.”<sup>32</sup> Religion thus becomes a key lens through which to examine the lived experience of marginal communities. It also serves as a critical vehicle for examining the processes of intercultural exchange while at the same time celebrating the cultural expressiveness of Cuba’s diverse religious landscape.

For its part, Casa del Caribe has grounded its official endeavors in a process of affirming and legitimating an array of ritual practices, as well as the practitioners (*portadores*, or tradition bearers) of African derived religions. This particular emphasis on the practice as preserved within families and communities has led to a focus on the moral authority of devotees (*creyentes*) and leaders (*santeros/as*, *paleros/as*, *manbos*, *houngans*, *espiritistas*) selected by senior cultural researchers working in Casa del Caribe. The center of authority for granting legitimacy to haitiano-cubano expressive forms has come through the efforts of this regional institution. Today, there is hardly a Haitian-Cuban community untouched by Casa’s reach. Interestingly, while state intervention has grown to a certain degree in tandem with community initiatives, Casa’s investment in exposing subaltern expressions has resulted in a hierarchy among folkloric troupes and, likewise, the popularity of certain communities and troupes over others. Over time, ritual specialists supported by cultural researchers at Casa del Caribe have gained greater spiritual capital and are benefitting from their access to broader, more expansive networks.

## ***FROM STAGE to STREET Gagá in the Festival Circuit***

One such performance space that is creating a new arena for communal gathering is the *Gran*

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*Gagá*, which has been part of the program of events in the annual Fiesta del Fuego sponsored by Casa del Caribe. Concerned that *Gagá* as a cultural practice is disappearing, I spoke to several *Gagá* performers in the summer of 2009 about the fate of the form:

*Gagá* will never die and it is not dying. We have just moved it from the bateyes to the streets and stages. We don't all live in the bateyes anymore and we don't all cut cane. Our foreparents did and they kept the *Gagá* alive in the bateyes because that was where they lived and worked, where they shared with one another....But we have other celebrations where we come together, like the Festival of Fire, and we have our own community celebrations in Ramon, San German, Cueto, and we dance *Gagá* then. The old people are tired of walking, but we will keep the tradition alive in our own way, in the streets, where we don't just sing to ourselves anymore but to everyone....Now everyone wants to learn Kreyol in Cuba and learn our dances. It's even on the national stage.<sup>33</sup>

As a case in point, the Gran *Gagá*, which has been part of the festival program since 1994, presents an occasion where approximately ten to fifteen groups comprised of first-, second-, and third-generation Haitians take to the city streets of Santiago in a celebratory procession and performance. Those who assemble each year have extended their contractual agreements with the *Iwa* to make this annual pilgrimage.



Photo by Yanique Hume.

Lifted out of its Lenten season and outside of the forested environs, it may appear to be a more secular public spectacle, but I would argue that beneath the public transcript of playful festivity operates the seriousness of communal work. In this context the gods are not feasted

in the exposed environment, but there exists the collective labor of fostering community and a shared identity through performance. Unlike its rural counterpart, the Gran Gagá presents an opportunity for several Gagá bands/sociétés and Haitian-Cuban communities to meet and celebrate. With many of the community members getting older, the trek through the countryside is growing more difficult. As a result, Gagá celebrations in the bateyes have been radically reduced to accommodate the inability of members to make the journey to neighboring bateyes.<sup>34</sup>

Today, the meeting of different Gagá bands in this annual street festival is reviving the sense of community, which was fostered by decades of marching through the cane fields. The occasion is therefore filled with excitement, as community elders reconnect with the extended family of Haitian descendants living across Cuba. Those who migrated to Havana and other parts of the island use the Gran Gagá as an opportunity to reestablish ties, foster new ones, and, in a sense, mold their own imagined communities outside the confines of the batey. No longer banished to their communities where they performed in insulated isolation for decades, by claiming the public space of the streets afforded them for that one day, disparate Haitian-Cuban communities assemble under one national flag and dance to one rhythm, regardless of their diverse experiences in Cuba. They are able to use their traditional festive form to celebrate their ethnic and cultural identity and in turn lay claim to their shared historical legacy and sense of belonging to Haiti, as well as the Cuban national space.

The Gran Gagá functions as its own discrete festival within the overall structure of events featured in the Festival of Fire. As such, it has its own internal logic and by extension operates somewhat outside of the template established by the Festival of Fire. As an example, festival organizers or researchers do not mediate the event. Moreover, because of its distance from the city center, it does not attract large crowds of tourists. One may conclude that the marginality of these communities and Haitians more generally is replicated in the placement of the event in the overall Festival structure. It is my contention, however, that this particular spatialization of the Gran Gagá has encouraged the transference of the integrity of the ritual structure within the overall festive frame. The performers thus view the Gran Gagá not as a performance for spectators, but for each other. As *onemajó yonc* mentioned, “We dance for our ancestors in the batey and they look over us here in the city where we dance amongst our friends.”

Gagá, as a traditional ritual and festive form, finds itself in ever-changing performance contexts. According to Nestor García Canclini, it is “doubly enrolled” in a “*historical* (i.e. a process that gives identity to ethnic groups) and a *structural* (i.e. within the present logic of dependent capitalism)” paradigm (1988, 486; 1993, 45). However, in respect to the latter, Gagá’s integration into this structural enrollment to which García Canclini refers is tempered by Cuba’s rather peripheral socio-political and economic positioning in the global economy. To this end, Gagá is yet to be inscribed within a strictly consumerist framework<sup>35</sup> in that it is not underwritten by multinational companies, corporations, or firms, but indeed still operates under

the patronage of the gods, community members, and, to a growing degree, state institutions.

The argument here is that, despite the challenges of commercialization and folklorization, for popular cultural forms and identities deemed invisible and unworthy, their exposure can also be interpreted as a challenge to conventional notions of nation and identity. These twin processes (folklorization and commodification) also serve as a vehicle for giving expression and a space for alternative identities to be projected. While not immune to the dangers Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett warns against, the theatrical spectacle has also proven to stimulate an indigenization process in the communities in which the forms emerged. What has become apparent is that, as these cultural expressions become more folklorized, they also enter a process whereby they are further traditionalized, forming what David Coplan (1994) has identified as a “dynamic of persistence” (19) amidst the changing realities and shifting performative contexts in which they are now operating. In other words, the folklorization process has encouraged the Haitian-Cuban field laborer, who also dances and drums in his/her ethnic enclaves to perform across wider performance circuits and in turn to reassess, reconfigure, and adapt what has been guarded as a traditional form. In publicly staging once private cultural forms, the descendants of Haitians are using their sacred traditions as a way of articulating their distinct identity. These staged events also serve as a catalyst for stimulating interest in maintaining these cultural performances so that they are not reduced to folly, but upheld as icons of a collective identity and as a marker of history. The cultural imperative to perform in today’s Cuba also extends beyond the politics of national recognition. Through staging their rites for tourist consumption, haitiano-cubanos are using their traditions to make a viable living and gain much needed material resources to meet their needs. Dancing to their gods to the applause of foreigners is not simply the enactment of a quaint pastime, but an essential part of making a living in today’s rapidly changing Cuba.

The staging of Vodú rituals for popular consumption goes beyond mere folkloric spectacle and entertainment to that of redefining and expanding the contours of Cuba’s late socialist cultural patrimony and national identity. The new public spaces for expression that have opened up in the aftermath of Cuba’s Special Period<sup>36</sup> have become critical for understanding contemporary cultural politics. State-sanctioned performances allow for an examination of inclusionary policies that focus on the exploitation of culture as a pivotal democratizing resource.<sup>37</sup> These also offer an opportunity to explore the agency of ordinary Cubans of Haitian descent as they express their ethnic heritage and social identities and in turn further nuance prevailing discourses on race, culture, and citizenship. As noted haitiano-cubano percussionist Yesel Espret notes in an interview conducted in 2009, “Today everyone wants to be Haitian, talk Haitian, dance Haitian and even you are here to study what it is like to be Haitian.”<sup>38</sup> The once isolated mountain cultures of Oriente are thus part of an ever-expanding national identity adding another exotic mix to Cuba’s multicultural folkloric imaginary. This increased public presence stands as an example of Cuba’s protracted history of incorporating marginal citizens through the staging of folklore.<sup>39</sup> However, the late socialist context presents an interesting moment for assessing how regional institutions interpret and galvanize the cultures

of Cuba's marginal folk. It simultaneously asks us to consider the implications of the descendants of field hands becoming increasingly enrolled in folk tourism projects.

## **Conclusion**

The increased public staging of Haitian-Cuban cultural expressions, like other black cultural performances endorsed by the Cuban state, have evoked contradictory reactions from the wider Cuban community, in particular those who do not share the same ethnic heritage. Many of the performers, as well as Haitian-Cuban community members, view the public re-enactments as a celebration of Cuba's cultural diversity and as a means of preserving and reclaiming marginal expressions through performance. For others Haitian forms have no place in the national folkloric repertoire because they do not coincide with the normative understandings of Cubanness. This particular tension speaks to the dynamic migratory history that has come to define Oriente as a culturally distinctive space from Havana, thus revealing the lack of a homogenous cultural sphere in Cuba.

This essay has also argued that each performance of Gagá brings its own localized and spatialized meanings, thus it calls into question any view of a universal Gagá in terms of form and functions. Gagá is inherently malleable, and for that reason is subject to repeated appropriations, not only by national companies, but also by descendants of Haitians wanting to reconnect with their historical experience and commemorate their collective identity and sense of community through their own local celebrations. As Dolores Yonker (1988) reminds us, "Rara [Gagá] emphasizes movement in space rather than observances at fixed locations" (151). To this end, the process of deterritorialization and subsequent reterritorialization across geographical locales and spaces is indicative of the inherent migratory and dialogical structure that governs the form. I caution that if we deny the creative agency of its performers to resignify their practices as they traverse different contexts, we miss the dynamic logic that is at the ontological root of Gagá. Gagá is at its core about crossings, passages, and journeys, linking the sacred and secular realms of existence with the communities and territories they pass through, solidifying the identities of those in the immediate space of its enactment and also reaching across to those who exist in different environments.

In this vein, Gagá evokes a transnational performance geography that bespeaks the foundational role of Vodou in the diasporic experience of Haitian migrants. Its presence in Cuba attests to the ways Haitians have historically used their popular cultural forms to create expansive "social fields" that allow them to re-root themselves in the diverse spaces they call home, while maintaining a connection to the homeland, either literally or figuratively (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994; McCarthy Brown 1997; McAlister 2002). The argument here is that the facilitation of this diasporic cultural formation and the subsequent fashioning of diasporic subjectivities emerge out of this process of dislocation and relocation (Alleyne-Dettmers 2005).

Haitiano-cubanoexpressive culture is a hybrid form that configures a distinct ethnic/cultural

identity that in fact embodies the plurality of contemporary cubanidad. At the same time, the expansive networks and diverse social contexts of cultural performance have been instrumental in satisfying the contemporary integrationist policies of the Cuban state. In the countryside, Gagá and other Haitian expressive forms have served to articulate a sense of belonging for the descendants of displaced migrants and a corporeal diasporic consciousness. As Gagá moves to the stage, it increasingly becomes an emblem of Cuba's diverse heritage. What Gagá reveals is the manner in which cultural forms are reconstituted over time, thus taking on new and expansive meanings and socio-cultural functions in and through varying social and national contexts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay readers will encounter the terms “Rara” and “Gagá” used interchangeably, in part because, in Cuba, both are used to reference this Haitian festival tradition. For clarity, I will use “rara” when specifically speaking of the festival form in its Haitian context and “gagá” or “ban rara” when speaking of the Cuban context. This article grows out of a larger manuscript entitled *Haiti in Cuba's Folkloric Imaginary*, which examines the dynamic interplay of cultural performances and identity formation among Cubans of Haitian descent. The Social Science Research Council and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research supported ethnographic and archival research conducted in summer 2000 and 2001-2004. The Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts and the Institute of African Studies, Emory University provided additional funding.

<sup>2</sup> Cuba received two significant migratory flows from Haiti, the first in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth century period of the French *émigrés* class and their

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enslaved domestics. This group, called the *francesas*, developed the famed Tumba Francesa mutual aid societies. The second and more substantial migration was centered around the first three decades of the twentieth century, with numbers ranging from 200,000 to 600,000. See Pérez de la Riva (1979); Alvarez Estévez (1988); Carr (1998).

<sup>3</sup> I utilize the Cuban spelling “Vodú” in reference to the hybrid religious tradition observed in Cuba, which is derived from the Haitian cosmological universe. The spelling speaks to the process of syncretic transformations the religion underwent upon being brought to Cuba by Haitians and maintained by their descendants. I use “Vodou” in reference to discussing Haitian and not Haitian-Cuban practices.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the placement of Haitians in eastern Cuba, see Yanique Hume, 2011, “On the Margins: The Emergence of a Diasporic Enclave in Eastern Cuba,” in Regine O. Jackson (ed) *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora* (NY: Routledge).

<sup>5</sup> Most notable among these institutions is Casa del Caribe, which was founded in 1981 in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Barranca resident, Berta Armiñan, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003. All interviews and personal communications cited were conducted in Spanish or Cuban Kreyol and translated by the author.

<sup>7</sup> The peak periods of Antillean labor migration to Cuba (1906-1933) also coincided with the rampant anti-*brujería* campaigns to eradicate Cuba of atavistic practices. Afro-Cubans and Haitians, in particular, often fell prey to the accusation of Rural Guards declaring that they were stealing children to perform human sacrifices. See Helg (1997). Throughout this essay I will utilize the spelling Vodú when referencing the hybrid religious form that developed in Cuba as a derivative of its Haitian counterpart, Vodou. This distinction is important for while the cosmological structure remains intact, Cuban Vodú developed under specific socio-cultural conditions and in relation to a diverse array of religious expressions found in Cuba.

<sup>8</sup> Characters are composed of a hierarchy of ritual specialists, musicians, dancer queens (both dancers and keepers of the ritual knowledge), flag-bearers, and baton-twirlers. Each plays their specialized tasks including clearing a path for the safe passage of bands, conducting rites, dictating the pace of the musical arrangement and singing of songs, soliciting monetary contributions. Rara/Gagá bands are also comprised of revelers who move in and out of the procession, blurring the lines between performer and spectator.

<sup>9</sup> Verna Gillis and Gage Averill (1991), however, note that while Rara is associated with Lent, it is not bounded exclusively to a specific season, but instead is performed as needed. As a grassroots cultural expression, Rara is used by political leaders as well as the people to voice particular concerns, thus, “despite its seasonal association, rara can take place at any time of the year and animates political rallies, demonstrations, and celebrations of all types” (3). See

also Michael Largey (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Barranca resident, Berta Armiñan, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003. All interviews and personal communications cited were conducted in Spanish or Cuban Kreyol and translated by the author.

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<sup>10</sup> The burning of an effigy is a popular subversive act in most carnival traditions of the Circum-Atlantic. Within the specific case of Rara in Haiti, the image of the Jew or *fwif* is collapsed into that of Judas, who was blamed for the killing of Christ. For McAlister (2000), the Jew in Haiti is a central referent for the “other,” difference, and an anti-Christian force. In Cuba the *fwif* does not evoke religious sentiment, nor is it identified with a specific ethnic or religious community. Instead, the burning of the *fwif/dyab* represents the purging of negativity and/or forces of oppression.

<sup>11</sup> Haitian heritage communities spanning across Camagüey, Las Tunas, Ciego de Avila, Santiago de Cuba, Guantanamo, and Holguin, routinely come together in ritual feasts that are parties for the *lwa*. The height of the ritual season is in June, around Ogou’s feast day, and December, where Gran Bwa and other divinities are honored. These occasions for ceremonial gathering have expanded into a rather elaborate festive terrain of community events initiated by members of these longstanding communities.

<sup>12</sup> The rampant brujería [witchcraft] scare in Cuba during the early twentieth century coincided in great part with the increased numbers of Antillean immigrants entering the island at first seasonally and later on a more permanent basis. These Black Caribbean laborers were imagined to be not only socially and culturally other, but indeed a threat to the social fabric of Cuba. Haitians in particular were consistently vilified and feared because of their perceived moral degeneracy and proclivity for witchcraft. For more on the treatment of Haiti in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, see Helg (1997); Carr (1998); and McLeod (1998).

<sup>13</sup> In his 1983 publication *Procesos Ethnoculturales de Cuba*, Cuban historian Jesus Guanche notes that *La Persévérance* and *La Concorde* are reported to be first Masonic Lodges founded in Cuba by the French immigrant class fleeing the turmoil of the revolution in Haiti. Approximately three years later in 1792, the first *Sociedades de Tumba Francesa* (French Drum Societies) were founded by enslaved and free Black franceses as mutual aid organizations that provided a social forum that proved critical to the maintenance and development of cultural expressions, like the creolized contradance (Tumba Francesa), which shares the same name as the fraternal organization.

<sup>14</sup> For more on Gagá in the rural environs of eastern Cuba, see Jorge Berenguer Cala, *El Gagá de Barranca* (2006); Jesús Guanche and Denno Moreno, *Cadije* (1988); and Alberto Pedro, “La Semana Santa Haitiano-Cubana” (1967).

<sup>15</sup> Rehearsals have long been a feature of Gagá whereby the normative six weeks of parading the streets are placed into six days of feasting and practicing in the compound of the owner of a Gagá band. The community would prepare their arrangements to the music of accompanying percussive instruments, including the now defunct *caolina*, or what Harold Courlander in his 1960, *The Drum and the Hoe*, identified as the *tambor maringouin* (mosquito drum). The days of rehearsals culminate in a procession through the cane fields on the Saturday just before Easter Sunday.

<sup>16</sup> The term *majó* means “major,” or a title of authority and knowledge bestowed onto those who master a particular performance skill, such as baton or sword twirling. The use of military or aristocratic titles in Caribbean festive forms is quite abundant. For more, see David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned* (2003).

<sup>17</sup> Critical to the success of the rites performed by the Gagá ensemble is the mobile orchestra that provides the necessary musical accompaniment and songs to invoke the spirits. While there is no set template for the configuration of the orchestra, the instrumental ensemble is loosely structured around several lines of musicians playing a wide range of percussive instruments. Among the instruments featured are the carved conical Petwo drums, *gwo baka* and *ti baka*, *tambourin*, which is known as the *basse* in Haiti. This hand-held bass drum head is played in a similar fashion as a tambourine. However, unlike the shrill sound of a tambourine, the *tambourin* produces sounds that are relatively low in register. Accompanying the drums is a *samba*

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(known as an *ogan* in Haiti), a hoe blade that is played with a piece of metal to keep time. The *lanbi*, or conch shell trumpet, is a common signaling device that is used to set the tempo and mark any shift in the velocity of the drum rhythms. The *baccine* (*vaksin*) are the instruments most readily associated with Rara/Gagá music. They are hollowed pieces of bamboo of varying lengths that are used as a flute to produce either high or low tones. The bamboo or plastic (PVC pipe) *baccine* are also joined by the *kewon*, a foot-long handmade metal trumpet that flares at the end. Together these instruments create the syncopated and melodious soundscape that collectivizes the crowd in communal ritual action and liberates them to gyrate to the bawdy and robust reverberations. For more on these instruments and Haitian music in general, see Gage Averill (1997) and Averill and Yih (2000).

<sup>18</sup> For more on the multidimensionality of Ogun, see Sandra Barnes (1988).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with drummer Emilio Milanés, Palma Sorriano, Cuba, July 8, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> For more on Haitian transmigrants, see Laguerre (1998); Glick-Schiller and Fouron (2001).

<sup>21</sup> The continuous transnational flow of Haitian students enrolled in tertiary institutions is the most sustained contact between the two countries. When I first started conducting research in these communities fifteen years ago, the degree of social interaction with Cuba's Haitian heritage communities was quite minimal, if existent at all. However this reality is shifting.

<sup>22</sup> In 1963 and 1964 the famous Conga Los Hoyos, under the direction of Juan Esparraguerra, included Gagá choreographic sequences for the first time in their Carnival procession. In contemporary Carnival processions, Gagá dances are not as visible; instead the annual Festival of Caribbean Culture (Fiesta del Fuego) is the event where Gagá and other Haitian-Cuban dances are most predominantly exhibited.

<sup>23</sup> *Sociedades de Tumba Francesa*, as Rafael Brea and José Millet (2001) suggest, "are social clubs and mutual aid societ[ies] founded by Black and French-Haitian mestizos, self-named 'franceses'...Its festivities were under the protection of virgin and saints whose images are hung on the walls, next to photographs of Cuban patriots, some of whom participated in the festivities before going to the War of Independence" (204).

<sup>24</sup> The *contradanse* sets performed by Tumba associations and within the folkloric repertoires include *mason*, *yubá*, and *frenté*. Each of these forms expresses a corporeal confluence of European and African aesthetic features, including an upright carriage of the torso juxtaposed against a more relaxed waistline and pelvic girdle. In the case of *frenté*, the more African component is expressed in the improvisational skills that showcase intricate polyrhythmic footwork.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Antonio Pérez, Santiago de Cuba, 3 June 2001.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the staging of Afro-Cuban sacred forms, see Katherine Hagerdorn (2001).

<sup>27</sup> For more on women in Vodou see Joan Dayan (1994) and McCarthy Brown (1997).

<sup>28</sup> This mystical totality within Vodou cosmology is represented in the androgynous divinities Legba and Gede, and also manifested in the cosmic couples Dambala and Ayida Wedo, Agwe and La Siren, as well as the sacred twins, Marassa.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with José Millet conducted in Casa del Caribe, Santiago de Cuba, 18 July 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Sylvia Gardes, 15 July 2009.

<sup>31</sup> The writings of Fernando Ortiz have been pivotal to the formation of Afro-Cuban Studies. For more on the shifts in his perspectives concerning the location of blackness within the study of Cuba, see Robin Moore (1994).

<sup>32</sup> Personal communication, Joel James Figarola, Santiago de Cuba, 10 July 2000

<sup>33</sup> Informal interviews and conversation with Gagá performers in Santiago de Cuba, 2009. The discussion was recorded on a bus ride back to the hotel where rural Haitian-Cuban bands were staying during the weeklong Festival activities.

<sup>34</sup> The aging population of *haitiano-cubano* batey residents and the increased migration of Cubans of Haitian descent to neighboring towns and urban centers has borne witness to a radical decline, since the early 1990s, in the customary annual spring Gagá processions. Thus, only two or three communities observe a scaled down version of the rites in local bateyes, and their celebrations are not always observed during the annual Holy Week. The communities that still observe the events during Semana Santa (Holy Week) include Cadije, Barranca, and La Caridad.

<sup>35</sup> In their work on the intersections of festivals and cultural politics in Puerto Rico and Venezuela, respectively, both Arlene Davila (1997) and David Guss (2000) interrogate the role of multinational companies and their sponsorship of community and state-sanctioned public festivals. This trend is, however, notably absent from Cuba's socialist context.

<sup>36</sup> Cuba's "Special Period" roughly corresponds to the decade of the 1990s following the demise of the Socialist Bloc where Cuba entered a period of austere economic restructuring and increased socio-economic deprivation. In the wake of this period of insecurity, Cuba witnessed the emergence of diverse cultural practices and increased cultural production with alternate formulations and critique of cultural identity.

<sup>37</sup> For more on the uses of culture as resource, see Yúdice (2003). For an elaboration of contemporary Cuban cultural politics and ideology, see Hernandez-Reguant (2009).

<sup>38</sup> Telephone interview with Haitian-Cuban percussionist, Yesel Espret. 15 May 2009.

<sup>39</sup> See for example Hagerdorn (2001), Knauer (2009), and for contemporary discussion on “folklore,” see Hernandez-Reguant (2009) and Viddal (2012).

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