

## Reviews



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**KRISTINA WIRTZ.** *Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 344 pp. ISBN: 9780226119052.

Kristina Wirtz's new book is a fascinating study of the ways blackness is represented in contemporary Afro-Cuban folklore in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba, and more broadly within the nation's collective identity. Drawing on extensive fieldwork with folkloric troupes and religious practitioners, the author presents semiotic analyses of various cultural representations—including images, bodies in motion, and spoken and sung voices—in which Africa is remembered and embodied.

As a linguistic anthropologist, Wirtz relies heavily on semiotics theory, an approach that has both advantages and drawbacks. Her goal is “to consider how contemporary performances explicitly or tacitly evoke earlier genres or present themselves as part of ongoing traditions, and . . . contribute to a process of creating . . . distinctive figurations of Black characters and associated African or Afro-Cuban cultural forms” (8). The book succeeds in this objective, as Wirtz painstakingly parses diverse aspects of African-derived folkloric and religious performance, positing that they tend to reify stereotypical, even racist, representations of blackness. The respective foci of the chapters are: images (ethnographic photographs and Afro-Cuban-themed paintings), movement (of parading and dancing bodies), spoken voices (of religious participants during spirit possession), folkloric song, and folkloric spectacle. Wirtz's ethnographic research is impressive in its variety of content. For example, chapter 3 discusses Santiago's famed Carnival congas (parading percussion ensembles that enjoy mass spectator participation), chapter 4 analyzes the different voicings of Africanness found in religious rituals, and chapter 5 details the historical remembering and racial pride enacted in the songs of the city's *Carabalí cabildos*.<sup>1</sup>

The aspect of Wirtz's narrative that is not as successful concerns the book's readability and broader accessibility: the book does not seem designed to have an impact beyond a scholarly community well versed in semiotics. Many of the chapters contain too much theoretical terminology,

which renders the writing somewhat impenetrable and overly dense, and at times obscures Wirtz's valuable insights. While her focus is on the discursive construction and reification of particular notions of blackness in Afro-Cuban folklore, she is also an ethnographer, and one expects a greater engagement with the perceptions of her research participants. For example, chapter 2 issues harsh critiques of the representations put forth by folkloric troupes, arguing that they reinscribe racist assumptions and contribute to the notion that blacks are "unassimilable." However, Wirtz also states, "Blackness becomes a mask that can be donned for performances of primordial authenticity, national folklore, or cultural resistance, quite apart from everyday racial identifications and consequences" (76). Thus, it is not clear whether she believes these representations actually have an impact on black Cubans' daily lives or whether they function as racial "costumes" that can be put on and taken off. More important, the reader is left wondering how the (mostly black) performers feel about these representations and whether they negatively affect their daily realities off the stage.

In the post-Soviet context of cultural tourism and a romanticization of Afro-Cuban culture, Wirtz makes an important point in highlighting the problematic discourses of racialized authenticity surrounding professional folkloric performances. Nonetheless, this statement seems extreme: "The price of this bid to authenticity is precisely marginalization, banishment by anachronism, constraint to fossilizing 'tradition' and blackface stereotype, labeling as spiritual and social danger, and, at times as a result, a denial of fully modern personhood" (87). Not all Afro-Cuban folklore can be characterized as "parodic depictions of Blackness" (70), nor is it always mutually exclusive with respect to modern life. Contemporary rumba performance is a prime example of how "folkloric" traditions continue evolving and incorporate elements from mass-mediated popular music.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Wirtz's study is a significant addition to the field of Cuban studies for various reasons. First, its focus on the traditions of Santiago sets it apart from most ethnographic studies in Cuba, which are centered on Havana. Second, she explores (in chapter 4) the fascinating distinctions between the varieties of Africanized speech found in ritual practices: *lucumí* (used in Regla de Ocha or Santería), *lengua conga* (associated with Regla de Palo), and *bozal* ("pidgin" Spanish associated with slaves). Beyond constituting one of the few published works that addresses these distinctions, Wirtz's analysis is refreshing in that it doesn't reinforce the widespread deification of Ocha, which has long held a privileged status among Afro-Cuban religions.<sup>2</sup> Finally, one of her strongest analytical contributions is found in the final chapter's genealogy of *bozal*, which is commonly used by religious practitioners in a state of spirit pos-

session. Positing that it is not (as the traditional narrative goes) an accurate historical representation of the way African-born slaves spoke, Wirtz instead discusses it as an “interdiscursive web” constructed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by various actors. These included authors of *teatro bufo* (comic theater), which featured actors in blackface and parodied the speech of slaves and free blacks, and pioneering folklorists Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera. *Bozal*, in other words, is a discursive construction shot through with racist connotations rather than a historical reflection of past speech patterns, a thesis that challenges “the authenticity of voices of African muertos [spirits] and santos [deities] in ceremonies and folklore spectacles” (286). Indeed, this important intervention both foregrounds the “invention of tradition” and interdiscursivity of cultural forms (particularly salient in the African diaspora), and challenges the Enlightenment-derived sacred-secular divide that denies the possibility of religious appropriation of popular culture.

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#### Notes

1. *Cabildos de nación* were mutual-aid societies organized by “nation” or African ethnic group and established by African-born slaves and their descendants under Spanish colonialism. The *Carabalí cabildos* represent the legacy of slaves brought from the ancient Calabar kingdom in present-day southeastern Nigeria.
2. Palo, in particular, is often juxtaposed to the “purer” Ocha and denigrated as “black magic.”

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LAURO AYESTARÁN. *Textos breves*. Compilación y prólogo de Coriún Aharonián. Montevideo: Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 2014. 228 pp. ISBN: 9974362504.

Desde hace un siglo el Ministerio de Educación y Cultura de Uruguay edita la Colección de Clásicos Uruguayos, que integra libros que considera pilares de su cultura e identidad. En 2014 salió éste, el N° 196 de la serie. Sin fatigar tan extenso catálogo, puedo decir que es el primero dedicado a la musicología. Su autor es Lauro Ayestarán (1913–1966), de formación autodidacta y en estrecha amistad con Carlos Vega, dio inicio al estudio científico de la música allí. El libro, en octavo, compendia veintiocho *textos breves* —adecuada definición ya que ese es su título, dado por Coriún Aharonián, musicólogo uruguayo, a su vez discípulo suyo y responsable de la compilación y los textos introductorios—.