

ARTICLE

## To Whom It Belongs: The Aftermaths of Afrocubanismo and the Power over *Lo Negro* in Cuban Arts, 1938–1958

Cary Aileen García Yero

Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, US  
Email: [caryaileen@gmail.com](mailto:caryaileen@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This article explores the impact of Afrocubanismo on the development of Cuba's arts during the 1940s and 1950s. The article follows the discursive output of artists, intellectuals, and cultural policy-makers of different racial backgrounds over the deployment of *lo negro* to construct *cubanidad*. It argues that, if the 1920s and 1930s experienced a movement towards the construction of a homogeneous mestizo Cuba, the following decades reveal an effort by some artists to desyncretize *lo cubano*. While some intellectuals constructed notions of authenticity that circumscribed black art to black artists, many white Cuban artists in turn embraced elite Hispanic heritage as their main creative language while valorizing some Afro-Cuban artists' recreations of *lo negro*. The article also demonstrates that the scholarly debates about cultural appropriation in recent decades have a long history within the Afro-Cuban community. It shows how Afro-Cuban artists and intellectuals pioneered arguments about the exploitative use of *lo negro* to make national art and the central role of culture in shaping racial inequality.

**Keywords:** Cuba; arts; race; mestizaje; cultural policy

### Resumen

Este artículo estudia la influencia del Movimiento Afrocubanista en el desarrollo de las artes cubanas durante las décadas de 1940 y 1950. El trabajo se enfoca en la producción discursiva de artistas, intelectuales y gestores de políticas culturales de diferentes identidades raciales y su uso de *lo negro* para construir nociones de *cubanidad*. Sostiene que, si las décadas de 1920 y 1930 experimentaron un movimiento hacia la construcción de una Cuba mestiza y homogénea, las décadas siguientes revelan un esfuerzo de algunos artistas por desincretizar *lo cubano*. Si bien algunos intelectuales construyeron nociones de autenticidad que circunscribían el arte negro a los artistas afrocubanos, muchos artistas blancos a su vez adoptaron la cultura hispánica de élite como su principal eje creativo al tiempo que valorizaban *lo negro* dentro del trabajo de algunos artistas afrocubanos. El artículo también demuestra que los debates académicos de las últimas décadas sobre apropiación cultural tienen una larga historia dentro de las comunidades afrocubanas, mostrando cómo sus artistas e intelectuales se opusieron a las formas explotadoras del uso de su cultura para hacer arte nacional, y destacaron ya desde aquella época el papel central del arte en la configuración de la desigualdad racial.

**Palabras clave:** Cuba; artes; raza; mestizaje; política cultural; apropiación; autenticidad; Afrocubanismo

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“All of our cultural manifestations as a people are penetrated by the black ingredient,” affirmed the editors of the Afro-Cuban journal *Nuevos Rumbos* in 1946.<sup>1</sup> “It beats in the colors and rhythms of our music . . . it is reflected in visual arts . . . it appears, lastly, with our slow and steady contributions to what we are and why we are, in our *mulato* culture.” Praising the resilience of Afro-Cuban heritage, the editors reaffirmed ideas that had become established during the 1920s and 1930s with Afro-Cubanismo, the art movement that had embraced *mestizaje* and valorized *lo negro* as Cuban for the first time in the nation’s history. The editors endorsed processes of transculturation that gave way to a distinct *mestizaje* shaped by Cuba’s “racial complexity.”<sup>2</sup> They situated *lo negro* at the center of Cuba’s modernity and grounded the nation’s cultural progress on its citizens’ equal access to opportunities.<sup>3</sup> However, not all Afro-Cuban intellectuals shared the same enthusiasm for the inclusion of *lo negro* within the nation’s culture. As the Afro-Cuban thinker Arturo González Dorticós stated in the Afro-Cuban journal *Atenas*, it was “inexplicable how and why a community could be socially despised and at the same time be artistically admired, their cultural influence recognized; how they could be an oppressed minority while being accepted as a dominant cultural force.”<sup>4</sup> González Dorticós alluded to the paradoxes of processes of appropriation of Afro-Cuban culture, noting how *lo negro* was valued within society while black citizens were marginalized. Unlike the editors of *Nuevos Rumbos*, Dorticós was less supportive of a “*mulato* culture” founded on racial inequality. Importantly, however, both sides coincided on the importance of culture and the arts for nation-making processes and for addressing issues of race.

As the 1930s came to a close, Cuba’s artistic community grappled with the legacies of Afro-Cubanismo. This revolutionary movement was not unique to the island. Scholars of Latin America have historicized the transition from late nineteenth-century ideologies of scientific racism, which buttressed whiteness, to the nationalization of more inclusive discourses of *mestizaje* since the 1920s across the region (Alberto 2011; Andrews 2004; Miller 2004, among others). The arts, scholars have argued, were central to constructions of *mestizaje* through movements such as Afro-Cubanismo (Moore 1997; Kutzinski 1993; Fraunhar 2018; Gottberg 2003). Less understood, however, is how the radical ideological shift of the 1920s and 1930s shaped the region’s intellectual communities during the following decades. Illuminating this often overlooked yet crucial period of transition, this article historicizes what happened next. It follows the discursive output of Afro-Cuban artists and intellectuals, as well as that of white state cultural policymakers and other Cuban artists of different racial backgrounds during the 1940s and 1950s. Focusing on their discussions over the deployment of *lo negro* to construct *cubanidad* at a moment of search for new creative paths, the article unveils their reflections on the consequences of Afro-Cubanismo for national culture.<sup>5</sup> I argue that, if the 1920s and 1930s experienced a

<sup>1</sup> “La cuarta dimensión del negro,” *Nuevos Rumbos* 1, no. 9 (September–October 1946): 5. The editors were Gabriel Arango Valdés and Juan Jiménez Pastrana. Pastrana was a historian, teacher, member of the Partido Socialista Popular, and contributor to major newspapers such as *El Mundo*. Less is known about Arango Valdés, who, together with Pastrana, founded *Rumbos* in 1936–37.

<sup>2</sup> Transculturation was a concept coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940. Ortiz explained transculturation as a process that involved the *deculturación* of Spanish and African cultures—cultural loss when moving from one’s own culture to a new environment—and *neoculturación*, a process of encounter where both cultures are changed and a new one, the Cuban one, emerges (Ortiz [1940] 1995). For more on the complexities and ambiguities of his work, see Bronfman (2004), García (2017), and Birkenmaier (2016).

<sup>3</sup> “La cuarta dimensión del negro,” *Nuevos Rumbos* 1, no. 9 (September–October 1946): 5.

<sup>4</sup> Arturo González Dorticós, “Semblanzas: James Weldon Johnson,” *Atenas* 2, no. 4 (August 1951): 13. Dorticós collaborated with important publications such as *Diario de la Marina*, among many others. He came from a family of Afro-Cuban activists that included Josefa Dorticós. See Hoffnung-Garskof (2019).

<sup>5</sup> To track these debates, which were mostly circumscribed within Cuba’s elite intellectual and art circles, I follow the main state journal on culture, *Revista Cubana*, and the Afro-Cuban press: *Nuevos Rumbos* (1945–1949), *Amanecer* (1952–1954), and *Atenas* (1951–1954), among other primary sources. So far we know little

movement toward the construction of a homogeneous mestizo Cuba, the following decades reveal an effort by some artists and intellectuals to de-syncretize *lo cubano* into a less cohesive national culture.<sup>6</sup> Their debates illuminate the power of the arts as a historical force in the constitution of racial formation and nation-making processes.

As Afro-Cubanista-influenced art was inevitably entangled with the creative use of Afro-Cuban culture, issues of cultural appropriation and authenticity were at the center of debates over cubanidad during the 1940s and 1950s. Concerns over these issues were not new; they had circulated within international Spanish-speaking intellectual circles as well as within the local Afro-Cuban press at least since the late 1920s. During this time, Afro-Cuban thinkers such as Gustavo Urrutia aimed to create awareness about the central role of African and African-descendent cultures in Western art production of the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> By the mid-1930s, Urrutia and other black and white intellectuals such as Salvador García Agüero and María Villar Buceta were already pointing to the exploitative dynamics around the commercialization of Afro-Cuban culture. These concerns only grew louder in the following decades.

The nationalization of marginalized popular cultures within Latin America has been the subject of scholarly attention, resulting in diverging views over its social and political implications. Some studies have argued that the incorporation of popular cultures into inclusive imaginaries of nationhood did not translate to substantial improvements for blacks or the eradication of racism (Kutzinski 1993; Hanchard 1994). More recently, scholars such as Peter Wade (2000) have explained that understanding cultural appropriation as a “percolating process” whereby white elites appropriate the culture of the marginalized sectors obscures and simplifies these complex processes.<sup>8</sup> This scholarship highlights the contentious dynamics over the nationalization of black culture as it was shaped by the participation of the popular sectors. The appropriation and commercialization of *lo negro* allowed black artists to transgress class and racial boundaries, bringing their art to previously unreachable spaces and gaining social and economic capital (Fox 2006; Wade 2000; Andrews 2007; Moore 1997; Hagedorn 2001; Hertzman 2013).<sup>9</sup>

This article expands this scholarship by historicizing the issue of appropriation and excavating Afro-Cubans’ discussions about the nationalization of their culture. It demonstrates that the heated scholarly debates about cultural appropriation of recent decades

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about the Afro-Cuban press. Most scholarly works have been bibliographic—such as Carlos M. Trelles’s *Bibliografía de autores de la raza de color: 1815–1926* (1927), and Deschamps Chapeaux’s *El negro en el periodismo cubano en el siglo XIX: Ensayo bibliográfico* (1963)—identifying and listing publications, dates, and authors but offering little information on number of copies printed, subscriptions, readership demographics, and so on. Nevertheless, looking at advertisements, authorship, and topics covered, one can deduce that their reach most surely exceeded the black communities. I thank Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof for his insights on the Afro-Cuban press.

<sup>6</sup> This article expands on the works of scholars such as Luis Duno Gottberg (2003) and Edna Rodríguez Mangual (2004), who, focusing on ethnography and literature, have noted how some Cuban intellectuals created alternative visions that challenged mestizaje and presented more heterogeneous understandings of the nation.

<sup>7</sup> See Gustavo Urrutia, “Influencia del arte negro,” *Adelante* 1, no. 3 (August 1935); “Cuba, el arte y el negro,” *Adelante* 1, no. 5 (October 1935); J. Jerez Villarreal, “El elemento de color en la evolución de la cultura cubana,” *Adelante* 1, no. 1 (June 1935); Pedro Marco, “Moda y modo negros,” *Revista de Avance* 3, no. 35 (June 15, 1929): 181; Jorge Mañach, “El artista y sus imágenes (Jaime Valls),” *Revista de Avance* 4, no. 45 (April 15, 1930): 114–116; and Gómez de la Serna (1931).

<sup>8</sup> Cultural hegemony “may be perpetuated in a general sense by the elites’ interest in the nation, but everybody works within it” (Wade 2000, 6–11); see also Shershow (1998). My work is in debt to scholars who have argued that the spread of national ideologies must be analyzed from below and not just as an imposition from above; see Hobsbawm (1992). Moreover, nationalist ideologies gain legitimacy as they incorporate the aspirations of the popular sectors; see the work of Florencia Mallon (1995).

<sup>9</sup> These works are part of a larger body of scholarship that has analyzed the effects of cultural appropriation for the marginalized communities. They point to both the benefits and the problems of processes of appropriation of popular cultures. See Scafidi (2005); Schwarz (2013); Raibmon (2005); and Johnson (2003).

have a long history within the Afro-Cuban community. Afro-Cuban artists and intellectuals pioneered arguments about the exploitative use of black culture to make national art and the central role of culture in shaping racial inequality. These debates only later became prevalent in the academy, hence the importance of sustained dialogue between academics, Afro-descendant activists, and artists to advance academic understandings of race.<sup>10</sup> While those involved at the time did not apply the term “appropriation” to talk about the use of *lo negro*, their concerns closely correspond to today’s discussions about the appropriation of marginalized cultures by hegemonic societies. These debates were equally centered on questions of cultural extraction, exploitation, misrepresentation, and power inequality.

The first part of this article analyzes the ways in which some state actors, such as José María Chacón y Calvo and Juan Remos, used *lo negro* sporadically to build a racially inclusive Cuba that was nevertheless grounded on white cultural hegemony. They mobilized narratives of racial harmony, such as *mestizaje*, that aimed to produce unity from diversity by valorizing *lo negro* in limited ways. These efforts were part of larger Latin American responses to counter previous US and European scientific discourses that had linked racial mixing with degeneration since the nineteenth century (Stepan 1991). The new Cuban art endorsed by the state sought to limit the use of *lo negro* and its possibilities, encouraging artists to dilute it into an ultimately exclusive and whitened national art. While most studies of Cuba’s republican period have focused on how white middle-class intellectuals and artists took from Afro-Cuban culture to make national art, less is known about how the state participated in these processes. This article therefore illuminates the ways in which the state legitimized cultural appropriation, nuancing previous scholarship that has underestimated the work of the state in the nation’s cultural life during the Second Republic.<sup>11</sup>

The interpretations promoted by state cultural policy leaders such as Chacón y Calvo and by the state-edited *Revista Cubana* contrasted with those of Afro-Cuban artists, most of whom understood racial harmony as an ideal still to be achieved, not as a reality. The second part of the article explores the disagreements within the Afro-Cuban community over the nationalization of black culture. While some supported it, others condemned it as exploitative and of little artistic significance. They celebrated *lo negro* and sought authority in African artistic and cultural forms. Similar to other diasporic black communities, Afro-Cuban artists mobilized claims of authenticity to guard the boundaries of *lo negro*. They used it as a category of inclusion and exclusion to build community, circumscribe *lo negro* to *el negro*, and gain cultural capital.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars have explained how singular notions of the other might hold marginalized artists to “impossible standards of ahistorical cultural purity.” This “authenticity trap” entrenches the gaze of the hegemonic society that stigmatizes and stereotypes marginalized groups (Raibmon 2005, 8–9). Some Afro-Cubans linked *lo negro* to African and African-descendent practices, often related to music and drumming. In doing so, they inadvertently contributed to notions of modernity that depended on constructions of space and time separating Africa and the West through the distance created between the primitive and the modern, the rural and the urban, the traditional and the vanguardist, and the

<sup>10</sup> Scholarly works on the appropriation of *lo negro* for nation making in Latin America developed in the 1990s. For instance, see Moore (1997). For a pioneering work, see Skidmore (1974).

<sup>11</sup> As Jorgelina Guzmán Moré explains, there is a widespread assumption that there was no state cultural policy during the republican years. For a detailed analysis of the substantial cultural policy work done by the state during the 1940s and 1950s, see García Yero (2019, 47; 2020, chap. 1). See also Guzmán Moré (2014); Suárez Díaz (2016); and Rivero (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Appropriation and authenticity have worked in similar ways within African American culture. See Johnson (2003, 2–3, 12). As Tamar Herzog (2003, 2) explains, categories of belonging involve determining who can enjoy the rights and privileges of membership in a community. I borrow Patricia Fox’s play on the words *el negro* (referring to black people) and *lo negro* (blackness); see Fox (2006).

past and the present, which David García (2017) has so persuasively explained. However, some Afro-Cuban artists countered reductionist notions of *lo negro*, constructing it in ways that defied dichotomy. They invoked *lo negro* in rather vague—and seemingly strategic—ways: *lo negro* was a “spiritual manifestation,” an intellectual “form,” an “aesthetic conception” that allowed for individual creativity. Defining *lo negro* openly enabled them to connect it to broad humanistic values that pushed against and moved beyond the modern/primitive divide constituting the authenticity trap, emphasizing instead black compassion, bravery, revelry, freedom, and dignity.

Criticism of the appropriation of *lo negro* was significant for Cuban national arts development. The third part of the article argues that these debates increased a bifurcation that was already constitutive of Cuban art. Even though notions of *mestizaje* grew in discursive power after the 1920s, several artists concurrently created notions of Cuba grounded on the racial divisions that had constituted the nation’s colonial past. They separated white rural Cuba (*criollismo*) from the urban black and racially mixed popular sectors. During the following decades, the radical ideological changes brought by Afro-Cubanismo steered many artists to question the movement’s representations of *lo negro*, furthering these divisions. Even though Afro-Cubanista-influenced creativity never ceased, criticism of the use and misuse of *lo negro* propelled many Cuban Vanguardia artists to privilege an elite Hispanist, European-influenced expression (for instance, the literary Grupo Orígenes, formed in the 1940s by a group of intellectuals who revolved around writer José Lezama Lima, and the Grupo de Renovación Musical, led by composer José Ardévol). While these artists’ preference for a Western “universal” was grounded on racist cultural hierarchies that privileged elite European-influenced art, I argue that this shift was not just a racist reaction against *lo negro* in the wake of Afro-Cubanismo, as scholars have pointed out (Moore 1997; Vega Pichaco 2013).<sup>13</sup> It was a multifaceted move that was in part shaped by the artists’ awareness of and opposition to the problematic uses of Afro-Cuban culture for the creation of national art. At the same time, challenges to appropriation legitimized the idea that Afro-Cuban art forms were best created by black artists (such as Wifredo Lam and Roberto Diago). In doing so, some artists challenged official notions of *cubanidad* that emphasized racial harmony through *mestizaje*. They pursued antisyncretic ideals of nationhood grounded not on the union but on further separation of Hispanic and African heritage.

### Cultural policy, racial harmony, and *lo negro*

During the 1940s and 1950s, state cultural policymakers pursued notions of racial harmony through cultural policy as part of wider governmental efforts to placate racial tension and create social cohesion in the face of persistent inequality and racial mobilization. By the late 1930s, racial equality was a valued principle of Cuba’s life that became enshrined in the 1940 Constitution. It was mobilized by the highest levels of government and ardently defended by institutions such as the Afro-Cuban associations, the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP), and the main labor union, the Central de Trabajadores Cubanos (CTC). The principle of racial harmony was sustained by two main national imaginaries: *mestizaje*, which was grounded on unifying claims that Cuba was a racially mixed nation formed mainly by Hispanic and African heritage; and racial fraternity, which was formed on the patriarchal notion that the nation was formed by men who were more than black, more than white, but above all, Cuban. These discourses were founded despite—or precisely because of—Cuba’s reality of racial inequality in efforts to bring union to a divided nation. By the 1940s, Afro-Cubans had achieved substantial gains with regard to employment,

<sup>13</sup> See also Duno Gottberg (2003) on the 1940s Vanguardia shift to a blanco-criollo expression.

salaries, and benefits through their activism in working-class organizations such as the PSP and the CTC. However, there were still marked racial differences in social indicators such as education, health, and housing (de la Fuente 2001; MacGillivray 2009; Domínguez 1978).

This was an intense period of social and political transformation that witnessed the rise of organized labor and of the welfare state, the rise and fall of the PSP, and the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, which resulted in revolution. However, the approaches of cultural policymakers to *lo negro* changed little, as the racialized ideological foundations that underpinned them remained constant. The widespread international acceptance of the alleged superiority of elite European-influenced art was largely unchallenged during these decades, as was the belief that using marginalized cultures for national art making was a valuable form of creativity—especially among those with cultural and social capital.

Through state publications and sponsored events, some policymakers occasionally embraced *lo negro* as Cuban and legitimized its use for the creation of national art. They presented it as a relatively fixed object that could be used for specific purposes and in specific ways, placing it within a cultural hierarchy that sustained the hegemony of Western art. For instance, prominent state cultural actors such as José María Chacón y Calvo and Juan J. Remos declared that the “genuine” and “authentic American folklore” was an “essential vehicle for the union of the Americas.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the “black motif,” which was “in truth really ours,” had greatly enriched Cuban arts, opening “a real outpouring of suggestions.”<sup>15</sup> In their view, the genuineness of Afro-Cuban culture was a crucial ingredient for their national culture recipe: only a unique *negro* folklore would create a true Cuban expression that could unite its people.

*Revista Cubana*, perhaps the most prominent cultural publication of the state, occasionally valorized African and African-descendant cultural forms. The magazine was created by Chacón y Calvo and published by the Ministry of Education’s Dirección General de Cultura, with a wide readership especially within the elite and middle classes and intellectual circles. It included the most important writers of the time, and its main objective was to shape national consciousness through cultural development. The publication disseminated the opinions of international figures such as Diego Rivera, who argued that Cuba’s “African coefficient” was its “most potent force of national definition.”<sup>16</sup> *Revista Cubana* also disseminated the ambiguous views of state actors that presented Afro-Cuban culture as an object at the service of elite European-influenced national art. Afro-Cuban culture was “ours,” with all the power embedded in its possession. In the words of Juan Remos, Cuban folklore was an important resource to “propel” the advancement of “high” Cuban art. The state should enable conditions such that “folklore could render all that this popular science has in its capacity, not only for the traditions that it involves, but as an inspiration for new works of art.” Folklore, therefore, was to submit to the needs of high national culture.<sup>17</sup> *Lo negro* had “enriched” Cuban arts, inspiring new artistic avenues,<sup>18</sup> yet it had value mainly as a flavoring element that could not stand alone on its own terms. The state journal included pieces that explained how folklore was an

<sup>14</sup> Chacón y Calvo, “Hacia una unidad continental,” *Revista Cubana* 17, no. 2 (April–December 1943): 261, 273 (declaration made at the first Conferencia de Ministros y Directores de Educación de las Repúblicas Americanas in Panama in 1943). José María Chacón y Calvo was an important Cuban intellectual and director of the Dirección General de Cultura of the Ministry of Education for several years during the 1930s and 1940s. Juan J. Remos was the minister of education in 1940 for the government of Fulgencio Batista. He remained associated with the Dirección General de Cultura, publishing regularly in *Revista Cubana*.

<sup>15</sup> Juan J. Remos, “El arte, nervio de la cultura,” *Revista Cubana* 17, no. 2 (April–December, 1943): 284.

<sup>16</sup> “Hechos y comentarios: Juicios de pintores mexicanos sobre la pintura cubana moderna; Diego Rivera,” *Revista Cubana* 21 (January–December 1946): 236–239.

<sup>17</sup> Juan J. Remos, “Una política de la cultura,” *Revista Cubana* 15 (January–June 1941): 46–52.

<sup>18</sup> Juan J. Remos, “El arte, nervio de la cultura,” 284.

important tool for nation building,<sup>19</sup> how the “infiltration” of lo negro was the “most valuable element” in the creation of national art,<sup>20</sup> and how the rich “folkloric sources” had to be “harnessed” for the creation of national culture.<sup>21</sup> Through these publications, lo negro was delimited as an object—a raw material, an element, a product—with which to make Cuban art. These articles conveyed a sense of entitlement over black culture. The objectification of lo negro, in turn, obscured its previous contextual values and the intended meanings given by the source communities.

Moreover, the cultural forms that emerged out of these processes of appropriation, such as “*poesía afroamericana*,” could be stripped of black authorship and were promoted in state publications under the belief that white artists, with their capacity for empathy, could express the worldviews of black Cuba specifically, and of black people in the Americas more generally. As *Revista Cubana* read, “the identity of the human species and the power of sympathy that unites men of all races to affirm that blacks and *mulatos* can express the sensitivity of the colored man from their own intuitive lyric center, and so can whites, by a fortunate phenomenon of reflection.” As such, *poesía afroamericana* was “an art of relationship,” “not exclusive to blacks, but of white collaboration.” *Poesía afroamericana* was not really “black poetry” but more “*mulata* poetry,” which in fact “in its origin [is] nothing but Spanish poetry.”<sup>22</sup> The claim that this poetry was primarily Spanish pushed against the significance of lo negro within this cultural production. It denied the particularity of the black experience and assumed that upper-class white artists could understand black marginalization without having lived it.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the argument that black poetry was ultimately Spanish poetry implied that *lo español* overrode and prevailed over lo negro, clearly disclosing the whitening efforts embedded in the unequal processes of cultural borrowing.

In sum, the state’s sporadic evocation of Afro-Cubanista notions that valorized lo negro was not incongruous with its overwhelming support for elite Western art. The national art that was encouraged by the cultural authorities sought to stylize popular expression into “high art.” The new Cuban art would filter lo negro to ultimately make a Western-based national culture. The state’s sanction of lo negro to make high art redrew racial and class differences. The Cuban case coincides with other Latin American countries where, as Peter Wade (2000, 6–11) has argued, the elite and middle classes not only tried to “discipline diversity by denying, suppressing, or appropriating it,” but by “actively reconstruct[ing] it.” The state’s ambiguous vision for a racially harmonious Cuba was not based on the equal contributions of black and white cultural expressions. While this vision sporadically valued black cultural expression, it confined it to the category of elements, reaffirming cultural hierarchies by subordinating lo negro to Western cultural hegemony. Ultimately, the state helped legitimize the making of a whitened art that was exclusive and elitist instead of representative of the people.

### Afro-Cuban debates about appropriation and authenticity

While the state ambiguously supported the use of lo negro to foster cubanidad in limited ways, the Afro-Cuban community was debating the consequences of the inclusion of their cultural heritage within Cuban arts. Since the 1930s, part of the community interpreted

<sup>19</sup> Chacón y Calvo, “Hacia una unidad continental,” 273.

<sup>20</sup> “Hechos y comentarios,” *Revista Cubana* 21 (January–December 1946): 236–239.

<sup>21</sup> “Sección de libros: Reseña by Mariano Grau Miró de *Africanía de la Música Folklórica Cubana*, de Fernando Ortiz,” *Revista Cubana* 27 (July–December 1950): 249.

<sup>22</sup> Emilio Ballagas, “Situación de la poesía afroamericana,” *Revista Cubana* 21 (January–December 1946): 29–32; 49–50.

<sup>23</sup> Miguel Arnedo-Gómez (2012, 47) has already noted these dynamics within the Afro-Cubanista movement.

mestizaje and racial fraternity as key to national integration. Unlike the state's often uncritical notions of Cuba's ideologies of belonging, however, many Afro-Cubans understood them strategically. Similar to other Afro-Latin-American communities, Afro-Cubans saw racial harmony not as a reality but as an ideal within a nation still struggling with racial inequality (de la Fuente 2001; Arnedo-Gómez 2012; Alberto 2011; Flórez-Bolívar 2016). The arts played a key role in their demands for justice, as Afro-Cubans argued that the vital contributions of Afro-Cuban culture to the nation's art had earned them a place within their country.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Afro-Cuban societies celebrated the work of Fernando Ortiz, one of Cuba's most prominent proponents of mestizaje.<sup>24</sup> They not only admired Ortiz's work but used it as a platform to highlight the persistence of racism in Cuba. The Club Atenas made Ortiz a member, while the editors of the Afro-Cuban journal *Amanecer*, Eitel Hernández and Faustino Dinas, argued that before Ortiz, there had been a lack of "systematic study" of Cuba's "black factor." The state and the larger public had "disregarded" lo negro, seeing it as an "insignificant theme, or as a taboo topic." Ortiz's scholarship, they thought, brought visibility to the community and helped counter widespread prejudice against lo negro.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, many Afro-Cuban intellectuals encouraged the inclusion of their culture within the nation's art as a desirable way to forge a racially harmonious Cuba. The editors of *Nuevos Rumbos* and *Amanecer* supported "national integration," demanding that Cuban elite composers continue the legacy of Afro-Cubanismo: Cuban composers should have a "more assertive nationalist concept" and use a "folkloric flavor" in their compositions to enhance the value of "our music."<sup>26</sup> Cubans should "defend the purity of the danzón" and further promote "the clave, guaguancó, zapateo criollo, and other pleasant manifestations that are genuinely Cuban."<sup>27</sup> Claiming cultural capital, these thinkers affirmed Afro-Cuban culture within cubanidad. However, their pronouncements conveyed anxiety over belonging, expressing the ambiguous position of lo negro within the nation. Taking the arts as a metaphor for their social condition, they implied that the achievements of integration were not enough if they still had to demand that artists increase the inclusion of lo negro in their creations. They seemed concerned that integration could be undone—hence the need to defend it through the sustenance of mixed and black genres such as the danzón and the guaguancó.

Nevertheless, the nationalization of lo negro allowed some Afro-Cubans to not only accept notions of integration but also celebrate Africa and cultural practices of African origin. According to the Afro-Cuban percussionist and composer Blanco Suazo, the way Afro-Cuban culture was socially perceived had changed by the 1950s to the point that Afro-Cuban religious necklaces had become "fashionable." He explained: "A few years ago, we were told of Africa, and we were induced to hate everything related to the Ethiopian species . . . Who would have dared to have a drum in their home? Who would have dared to use one of those colorful necklaces (which are fashionable today) without being exposed to accusations of witchcraft?" Even though the Afro-Cuban communities needed to continue to gain pride in their heritage, he was hopeful: "Now we have the drums not only in the orchestras but in the main ensembles of the Republic, which use drums of African origin."<sup>28</sup> His optimism sprang from comparing past and present—a past of outright rejection of Africa and African-descendent heritage, and a present that

<sup>24</sup> See note 2.

<sup>25</sup> "El Club Atenas y el homenaje al Doctor Fernando Ortiz," *Amanecer* (November 1955): 8–9 (the publication of a 1942 speech given by the Afro-Cuban leader Miguel Ángel Céspedes at the Club Atenas in honor of Ortiz); "El Dr. Fernando Ortiz en Unión Fraternal," *Nuevos Rumbos* 1, no. 6 (June 1946): 16.

<sup>26</sup> "A los compositores cubanos, una réplica musical," *Nuevos Rumbos* 2, no. 3 (March–April 1947); "Noticario," *Nuevos Rumbos* 2, no. 4 (September 1947): 10.

<sup>27</sup> "Movimiento de integración nacional," *Amanecer* 2, no. 3 (March 1953).

<sup>28</sup> Blanco Suazo, "África en duda," *Amanecer* 1, no. 1 (February 1952): 9.

embraced it within the highest levels of society. Indeed, the fast pace of the change must have seemed remarkable for some in the Afro-Cuban communities. Many of their members who were alive during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had experienced the banning of African instruments along with the prosecution of their compatriots for dancing to drums. Yet, by the 1940s, they could see the same instruments as part of the Philharmonic Orchestra concerts. They could hear and see their heritage valued by their fellow Cubans and feel pride.

However, not all Afro-Cubans were so optimistic about processes of cultural borrowing and about the legacies of Afro-Cubanismo. Unlike the Harlem Renaissance or the francophone Négritude, which were created mainly by black intellectuals and were centered on raising black consciousness, Afro-Cubanismo and its related expressions—such as *negrismo* and *lo afroamericano*—were mainly led by white artists.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the premise of these movements was mainly to advance national unity through cultural mestizaje.

Thus the question of how *lo negro* was used for artistic expressions and by whom was a sensitive topic that influenced the course of artistic production in the decades following the late 1930s. Several white Cuban and Afro-Cuban artists and intellectuals were preoccupied with issues of misrepresentation of *lo negro* and over who had the right to re-create black culture. Critiques of appropriation within Afro-Cubanista art were already loud by the late 1930s. In Cuba, the noise came from within, including from recognized exponents of *negrismo* such as the white poet Ramón Guirao, and from other white poets such as Eugenio Florit and María Villar Buceta. They considered the *negrista* poetry of the 1930s to be based on an outsider's approach that often painted a "caricature version" of Afro-Cuba.<sup>30</sup> Guirao called afro-Cubanista poetry "anecdotic, meaningless [*jitanyafórica*], onomatopoeic, sometimes supported by attitudes too childish and basic, if not caricaturesque, depressing" (Guirao [1938] 1970, 19). Nevertheless, like some of the Afro-Cuban thinkers mentioned above, these artists also understood the importance of the movement as a step forward concerning race relations on the island. They recognized that many white poets viewed *lo negro* "with sympathy."<sup>31</sup> *Negrismo* already "involves a sincere approach, a desire to shorten distances, to overcome obstacles that, for economic reasons more than for reasons of color or shade, impeded sympathy and fraternity. This, in our opinion, is the fundamental value of black poetics" (Guirao [1938] 1970). Their comments reveal the social significance of *negrismo*, underlining the anti-racist intentions behind the art, so radical for its time.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the critiques over past and present cultural appropriations continued forcefully. They came often from Afro-Cuban intellectuals and artists who opposed what they believed was the careless commercialization of black culture. Commercialization, they thought, destroyed the capacity of art to reflect emotions and historical contexts. Gabriel Arango Valdés and Blanco Suazo shared their concerns with the audiences of *Nuevos Rumbos* and *Amanecer*, respectively, about the "lack of scruples" of "some editors" as well as "certain musicians and singers" who, in using black culture, "deform and denaturalize the autochthonous element in the music of our peoples." Commercialization limited creativity and "annulled originalities,"<sup>32</sup> thus the need to fight

<sup>29</sup> For an analysis on the ethnographic and literary strategies of some Cuban writers to include and locate blackness in their imaginings of the nation, see Maguire (2011).

<sup>30</sup> Eugenio Florit, "Sin título," manuscript, 1939, in Eugenio Florit Papers, Cuban Heritage Collection, Box 4, File Lectures and Speeches 1939–64 (1 of 3 files); María del Villar Buceta, "Lo negro, provincia humana," *Adelante* 2, no. 18 (1936): 6.

<sup>31</sup> Florit, "Sin título."

<sup>32</sup> Gabriel Arango Valdés, "Cab Calloway se asoma a nuestro folklore," *Nuevos Rumbos* 3, no. 3 (March 1948): 29. Arango Valdés was the director of *Nuevos Rumbos*.

against the “renegades [*tránsfugas*]” and “shareholders of the *negrismo* industry.”<sup>33</sup> Asserting the purity of a black essence in need of protection, they assumed authority over the right ways to approach *lo negro*.

These Afro-Cuban thinkers thus insinuated that not all Cubans could express *lo negro* properly, arguing that some artists misrepresented “*afro music*” due to ignorance and carelessness about *lo negro*. Suazo explained that there were musicians who “capriciously” and “when they consider it pertinent” write up melodic lines “and firmly assert that have made a ‘*negroide motif*.’” They accompanied these “*caprichos negroides*” rhythmically, using instruments of African heritage, creating the association between “the wrongly called *negroide motif*” and “the rhythmic pattern” that was heard. These creations, in Suazo’s view, should be called not “*negroide motifs*” but “crazy [*disparatado*] motifs.”<sup>34</sup> Suazo and Arango pushed against stereotyping renditions of black musical culture that reduced it to just drumming and rhythm. They denounced those hostile to black culture as aiming to profit from it, creating a separation between those with the alleged authority to express *lo negro* and those without it. The artist Teodoro Ramos Blanco, the critic Joaquín Texidor, and the poet Nicolás Guillén echoed the concerns of Arango Valdés and Suazo. They explained that artists who did not understand black culture produced “mutilated” expressions of *lo negro*, presenting “what interests us the least [of the black form], the least transcendent; that is, the purely superficial.”<sup>35</sup> *Lo negro* had often been interpreted with a “certain exoticism,” “as something strange,” and as such it had been incorporated in contemporary arts.<sup>36</sup> Their charges of ignorance about, and distortion of, *lo negro* reflected on the fragility of racial harmony, revealing the existing gaps in understanding and cultural acquaintance between black and white Cubans.

These intellectuals concurred that the use of *lo negro* for artistic expression had been thus far just a craze of the moment. Ramos Blanco warned his audiences that black expression was a “spiritual manifestation,” not a “trendy theme.” The black form was not “a decorative topic meant for entertainment, as intended by certain spirits influenced by racist inclinations.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the white Cuban journalist Fernando G. Campoamor reiterated that the interest in *lo negro*, which was used and abused “snobbishly,” came “from outside, by endosmosis, it is reduced to a trend and exhausted, it dies for lack of air.” These renditions of *lo negro* had turned the *negrismo* movement into “one more -ism.”<sup>38</sup> Defined as a fashionable trend, *negrismo* could be undermined: Because it was frivolous, it could not express the humanity and complexity of *lo negro*; because it was transient, it had already lost its significance; because it was profitable, it had brought wealth to the wrong hands.

Several intellectuals further challenged the legitimacy of Afro-Cubanismo, denouncing what they perceived as the exploitative nature inherent in the nationalization of *lo negro*. The paradoxical coexistence of the valorization of *lo negro* with the marginalization of *el negro* within Cuban society had not escaped the attention of some of the white artists involved in Afro-Cubanista production nor of the Afro-Cuban community. Since the late 1930s, Guirao had pointed out that Western artists had used black culture mainly “for their own benefit.” Moreover, “this vigilant passion for *lo negro* made us think that a rational consequence of the movement could be that blacks acquired equality of opportunities and

<sup>33</sup> Roger Fumero, “Espaldarazo,” *Amanecer* 2, no. 3 (March 1953): page number illegible. Roger Fumero was *jefe de redacción* (managing editor) of *Amanecer*.

<sup>34</sup> Blanco Suazo, “África en duda,” 9.

<sup>35</sup> Teodoro Ramos Blanco, “Contribución de la forma negra en las artes plásticas,” *Atenas* 2, no. 8 (December 1951): 8–9.

<sup>36</sup> Joaquín Texidor, “Señales de un arte,” *Nuevos Rumbos* 3, no. 4–5 (April–May 1948): 21; Blanca Nieves Tamayo, “Explica Nicolás Guillén a los poetas franceses el sentido de su poesía,” *Amanecer* 1, no. 4 (May–June 1952): 10.

<sup>37</sup> Ramos Blanco, “Contribución de la forma negra en las artes plásticas,” 8–9, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Fernando G. Campoamor, “Negrismo, un ismo más,” *Atenas* 3, no. 10 (October 1954): page illegible.

the right to coexist harmoniously.” He concluded, “We have seen that these incursions into the rich veins of black quarries have not altered blacks’ social destiny.” He also emphasized the politics of empire at play between Africa and the West: “If blacks were invited to share the bread, if they were briefly seated at the table, it was so that they left something original on the white and starched tablecloth . . . Behind this sentimental development was a business shaped by colonial politics” (Guirao [1938] 1970, 14–15, 19–20).<sup>39</sup>

A few years later, other intellectuals who were highly connected to the work of African American thinkers transmitted to the readerships of *Amanecer* and *Nuevos Rumbos* the paradox of the conflicting cultural and social status of *lo negro* within the hemisphere’s societies. As mentioned before, González Dorticós explained how the work of Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke brought clarity to “the conundrum of the true position of the black within American culture, which constituted a paradoxical reality.” The author proceeded to contrast the strong influence of black culture in American societies with the oppression of black citizens.<sup>40</sup> Campoamor agreed with González Dorticós: *el negrismo* “didn’t even serve to keep the black, as a human being, exempted from colonial discriminations.”<sup>41</sup> This contradiction was “incomprehensible”; it escaped “all rational justification.” Nevertheless, “at least currently, that is the black’s position.”<sup>42</sup>

The contentions over who had the right to use *lo negro* further disclosed the fallacies of racial harmony by pointing to the unequal power dynamics embedded in the practices of appropriation. Guillén explained how Afro-Cubanista-influenced creations only appealed to the taste of the elites and served mainly to entertain them. Specifically, since the 1930s he had underlined in his poetry the violent origins of *mestizaje*, illuminating how its foundations were created not out of harmonious coexistence but out of exploitation and pain (Bronfman 2004, 149; Guridy 2010, chap. 3). Similarly, Suazo noted the power of “capricious” musicians who could come and use Afro-Cuban traditions as they pleased and do with them what they pleased. And while González faulted the “mercantilist” character of the white elites, Campoamor sarcastically wrote how Europe, with its power to take “sacred masks from the Ivory Coast, xylophones, bracelets, mango canes from Congo,” turned them into “fetishes and new idols” as if they were “toys.”<sup>43</sup> Words like “taking,” “squeeze,” “abuse,” and “oppressed” underscored the exploitative nature of the creative process.

Moreover, Afro-Cuban intellectuals aimed to bring humanity back to *lo negro* by challenging its objectification and envisioning it as a space for expressive freedom that allowed for infinite inventions. They defined *lo negro* as a spiritual manifestation, an aesthetic conception, an intellectual form, an emotion. These ways of imagining *lo negro* could express both personal and collective assertions of the self, open to unlimited creative paths. Ultimately, opposing the appropriation of *lo negro* was a question of resistance, regeneration, and triumph against racist exploitation. For instance, Ramos Blanco wrote in *Atenas* that Europeans were so enamored with the “primitivism” of African art that they wanted to “remove it” from its place of origin to insert it into “universal culture.” However, if they defeated the Africans physically, they could not defeat them “spiritually, because [the African] took revenge against his oppressors hiding in his deepest self the

<sup>39</sup> Even though he was very critical of the power dynamics between white artists and African art, Guirao still advocated for a *poesía afrocriolla* as the best exponent of national poetry. Like other *negrista* poets, the writers did not register their assumption of the alleged superiority of Western culture as a racist posture. The text ambiguously combines denunciations of the exploitation of Afro-Cubans with racist sentences such as: “In our case, the black’s primitive naivete uses the confident stream of *lo español* to become locally universal” (Guirao [1938] 1970, 24).

<sup>40</sup> González Dorticós, “Semblanzas: James Weldon Johnson,” 13.

<sup>41</sup> Campoamor, “Negrismo, un ismo más,” 36–37.

<sup>42</sup> Arturo González Dorticós, “Semblanzas: Claude MacKay,” *Nuevos Rumbos* 3, no. 1–2 (January–February 1948): 10.

<sup>43</sup> González Dorticós, “Semblanzas: Claude MacKay,” 10; Campoamor, “Negrismo, un ismo más,” 36–38.

secret mechanism of his aesthetic conceptions.”<sup>44</sup> There was a sense of revelry and triumph in the thought that the West had not been able to break through the spiritual power of African expression.

At the core of the concerns of these artists and intellectuals were questions of authenticity. Implicit was the idea of *lo negro* as a separate and unique expression that could only be created by black people. Already since the 1930s, artists such as Florit had questioned the right of white artists (such as José Tallet and Guirao) to articulate *lo negro* “without having the essential color that gave sincerity to their works.”<sup>45</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s, several intellectuals continued to contrast the interpretation of *lo negro* created by white and black artists. Building authority around the creation of *lo negro*, they used it as a category of exclusion and belonging; such contrasts framed black artists as the ones who could produce a genuine representation of *lo negro*.

The expressive freedom to conceptualize and manifest *lo negro* was circumscribed by the boundaries of race. Ramos Blanco distinguished between artists who, in his opinion, produced “superficial” versions of *lo negro* and artists who “felt” the black form and were able to reach “its inner core.” He asserted: “How different it is when this [black] form has been interpreted . . . by sincere artists who felt, without blush, the pride of being inspired by it.” He continued: “In the first case, naturally, the artist won’t offer from *lo negro* anything other than what is . . . purely superficial. In the second case, *lo negro* will be fully realized, since the genuine black soul will come with the form, esoterically, in all its splendor.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Campoamor noted that “there is the art of the ‘áfricos’ and the art of the ‘africultores.’ One is original, genuine, the other is invasive, clandestine. One . . . so legitimate, the other, on loan [*de préstamo*].”<sup>47</sup> Even though these quotes were not race specific, their narratives made race explicit as they framed Africa as the source of *lo negro* and Europe as the power that took it. Likewise, Nicolas Guillén separated his work from those of the Afrocanistas José Tallet, Amadeo Roldán, and Alejandro García Caturla, arguing that unlike them, he was able to pursue “the theme in depth.”<sup>48</sup> Consequently, while these intellectuals challenged the objectification of *lo negro*, they also aimed to regulate its use with regard to not only white artists but black artists as well. Authentic expressions of *lo negro* ought to be “deep,” “sincere,” and “genuine,” and there was power involved in determining which artistic output constituted the real black expression.

Ultimately, these debates produced two results: On the one hand, some artists moved toward a celebration of new black cultural forms that grounded their worth in their connection to Africa and was mainly produced by black artists such as Roberto Diago, Wifredo Lam, Ramos Blanco, among others. Other artists, such as some of those involved with Grupo Orígenes, distanced themselves from Afrocanismo by embracing Cuba’s Hispanic heritage in their creations.

### The bifurcation of Cuban arts into separate domains of expression

Not surprisingly, even though Afrocanista-influenced art continued to constitute a substantial part of the art created in Cuba in the 1940s and 1950s, the enthusiasm over Afrocanismo receded at least discursively within the artistic Vanguardias. In literature, *negrismo* was considered “abandoned,” “a school that today [1938] is considered a closed cycle.” Some of the Origenistas aimed to move away from the “folklorisms” of race

<sup>44</sup> Ramos Blanco, “Contribución de la forma negra en las artes plásticas,” 8–9, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Florit, “Sin título.”

<sup>46</sup> Ramos Blanco, “Contribución de la forma negra en las artes plásticas,” 8–9, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Campoamor, “Negrismo, un ismo más,” 36–37.

<sup>48</sup> Nieves Tamayo, “Explica Nicolas Guillén a los poetas franceses el sentido de su poesía,” 10.

nationalism toward the search for a more “universal”—read mainly elite Western—expression.<sup>49</sup> In painting, many artists of the second Vanguardia, such as Mariano Rodríguez, René Portocarrero, and Amelia Peláez, often pursued a white expression grounded on an elite Hispanic ethos (Martínez 2000; García Yero 2020). The abstractionists that formed the third Vanguardia of the 1950s discursively rejected race nationalism and echoed Grupo Orígenes’ push for a “universal” artistic language influenced mainly by North American abstract expressionism. In music, José Ardévol’s authority over the Grupo de Renovación Musical led some of its members to question the art of the Afro-Cubanista icons Roldán and Caturla. Toward the late 1940s, Ardévol and others returned to a neo-nationalist period, using titles that referenced Afro-Cuban musical motifs. However, their compositions became ever more dissonant and aurally abstract, sonically further away from Afro-Cuban music (García Yero 2020; Quevedo 2016; Vega Pichaco 2013).

Most important, these artists, most of whom were identified as white, justified their push against Afro-Cubanista-influenced creations with the same vocabulary used to criticize appropriations of lo negro. They reaffirmed the confines placed by Afro-Cuban artists on the uses of lo negro, widening the separation between what constituted “black” and “white” creation. They searched for “the universal” as if wary of being accused of misrepresenting and misinterpreting lo negro. They repeatedly argued that they wanted to move away from “the picturesque” and “the superficial” that were associated with Afro-Cubanismo. The artwork of Afro-Cubanismo needed to be “overcome [*superado*]” because of their “localisms and exoticism,” wrote Ardévol in *Espuela de Plata*, the journal that preceded *Orígenes*. Lezama described the art of the previous decades as a “shallow search.”<sup>50</sup> An obsession against “the exotic” marked the way that artists defined their works during the 1940s and 1950s. It was widely understood that the Origenistas’ opposition to Afro-Cubanista-related expression was a “reaction . . . against the superficial and inconsequential picturesque, toward which the *negrista* movement had degenerated in the hands of many.”<sup>51</sup> Ironically, they grounded their visions of the universal mainly in white elite culture: European (mainly Hispanic), or North American, with a sprinkling of Western-influenced Mexican and Argentinian vanguardism.

Perhaps not coincidentally, most of the artists who achieved recognition representing black expression in literature and visual arts after the 1940s were Afro-Cubans (such as Guillén, Wifredo Lam, Roberto Diago, Agustín Cárdenas, and Ramos Blanco). However, the ways in which their work was valorized by some white artists and critics was ambiguous. On the one hand, interpretations of Afro-Cubans’ recreations of lo negro challenged objectifying tendencies that constructed lo negro as a “thing.” These white artists and critics, like Afro-Cubans, defined lo negro as a spiritual and intellectual expression as well as a way of being. However, their statements built an aura of impenetrability around lo negro that further entrenched racial differentiation. Lo negro was othered as a “peculiar” way of life, presented as a hermetic world shaped by special sensibilities of seemingly unattainable depth. Moreover, the ways in which some white artists and critics legitimized the artistic work of Afro-Cubans distanced lo negro from modernity, associating it with already established stereotyping tropes: Lo negro was musical, magical, and traditional;

<sup>49</sup> This movement toward “universal” art aimed to transcend local expression and symbolism and to perfect mainly European and North American art forms and aesthetic concepts. A national work would achieve “universal” status if its quality excelled international standards mainly set by Western art schools. It did not entirely reject the use of local motifs (such as those from the Afro-Cuban communities), yet the use of “folklore” had to be done in particularly subtle ways that concealed it within Western creative structures.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Barquet (1996).

<sup>51</sup> Roberto Fernández Retamar quoting José Antonio Portuondo in his 1953 thesis (Fernández Retamar [1953] 2009).

it was something that needed to be rescued from extinction and oblivion.<sup>52</sup> Their ambiguous valorization of *lo negro* constructed the “authenticity trap” that Afro-Cuban artists would need to evade.

For instance, in the opinion of the white writer Cintio Vitier, Guillén was “the only one of our cultivators of *lo afrocriollo* who surpasses the speculations of the European-imported *negrismo* . . . . He assembles folkloric poetry of fine universality . . . based on an internal communication with the emotional and musical approaches of Cuban blacks and mestizos” (Vitier 1952, 4). Echoing Vitier, the white intellectual Roberto Fernández Retamar explained in his 1953 PhD thesis (published in *Ediciones Orígenes* at the request of Lezama in 1954): “As it has been repeated plenty of times, Guillén is perhaps the only Cuban poet for whom black poetry—or ‘*mulata*’ poetry, as he prefers to call it to underline the fusion of cultures—was not a trend [*moda*] but a mode.” Guillén’s work emerged “from the center of black sensibility” and therefore, he was “the most appropriate poet” to create black poetry (Fernández Retamar [1953] 2009, 75–77). Interestingly, the Origenistas also included in their journal the work on Afro-Cuban culture done by Lydia Cabrera. Even though Cabrera identified as a white Cuban, in the Origenistas’ opinion her work did not folklorize or exoticize *lo negro*. Instead, she aimed to deliver the voices of black Cubans and their worldviews without alteration, almost as if quoting her “informants.” Her work, they thought, allowed black Cubans to speak as subjects (Barquet 1996, 8–9; Rodríguez-Mangual 2004; Maguire 2011). The Origenistas selectively incorporated *lo negro* within the group’s artistic production. They collaborated with Wifredo Lam, including three of his portraits in *Orígenes*. They thought that Lam, like Guillén, achieved both an authentic black and universal quality (Barquet 1996, 5–7). Therefore, the group seemed to understand *lo negro* as a distinct form of expression that attained universal status when achieving a high quality of artistry. Ironically, measuring artistic quality was subjective, and the parameters were set by Western art standards.

Other prominent art critics, such as Loló de la Torriente and Joaquín Texidor, legitimized the work of Afro-Cuban visual artists by connecting their art with their racial identities. For instance, de la Torriente described Roberto Diago as a “black painter” who “has achieved very original visual art interpretations”; Diago produced a “black art . . . made by a black” as he delved “in the problems of the black population and finds ways to explain the dark world of Afro-Cuban tradition and legend.” Diago was innovative because he left behind the exoticisms of the past: “maybe without knowing it, Diago is creating a new modality of national visual arts.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Joaquín Texidor valued the “extraordinary” work of Diago because it revived “our country’s old black legends.” His painting “makes the ancestor tremble,” creating “an individual world” that revolved around his “guiding gods, his magic angels.”<sup>54</sup> Diago’s art was ambiguously defined between modernity and tradition. While it opened new paths to national arts, it was grounded on magic and legends of the past. His art was categorized to fit stereotyping visions of black religiosity such as darkness, secrecy, and superstition. Ambiguously, this dark side was embraced as very Cuban.

Likewise, the value of Ramos Blanco’s art was often associated with his blackness. The “great” work of Ramos Blanco expressed “the pains and sorrows of his race” (García Galán in Ramos Blanco 1946, 8). The white art historian Luis de Soto commended on the black artist’s sincerity and realism in the way he “cultivated . . . the black theme.” Ramos Blanco had “captured what is typical of his race more than what is individual of a particular

<sup>52</sup> For in-depth analysis of the discursive strategies that constructed modernist discourse in opposition to primitive Africa, see García (2017).

<sup>53</sup> Loló de la Torriente, “Valor de la pintura negra,” *El Nacional* (Mexico), June 10, 1947, newspaper clipping, personal archive of Roberto Diago (grandson).

<sup>54</sup> Joaquín Texidor, “Magia y vitalismo en la pintura de Roberto Diago,” *Nuevos Rumbos* 3, no. 3 (March 1948): 22.

model.” Ramos Blanco’s works, “inspired in the themes of the colored race,” went beyond the qualities associated negatively with Afro-Cubanismo such as “the picturesque and the folkloric.”<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, white visual artists who borrowed from Afro-Cuban culture could sometimes become targets of heavy criticism. For instance, Mario Carreño, who in the late 1940s began to move toward abstraction borrowing from Afro-Cuban religious iconography, was disparaged by Texidor as well as by the new generation of abstract painters. On Carreño, Texidor explained that the artist “has been moving towards a painting that does not count, does not fit, does not establish relevance in its sensibility.” Carreño followed the cubists, but “here he does not disclose the Cuban essence. Instead, he pursues a *cubanismo* that is superficial and touristy . . . it is no more than a propaganda poster of our Antillean paradise.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the originality of Luis Martínez Pedro was questioned by some within the new 1950s abstractionist generation who formed Los Once, given the resemblance of some of Martínez Pedro’s works to Lam’s paintings (Martínez 2017, 316). Moreover, even though the Onceños admired Lam’s work, they denied his influence over their work as they aimed to separate their abstractions from issues of race (García Yero 2020, chap. 6).

In sum, many in the art community embraced the works of Diago, Lam, and Ramos Blanco as well as the artistic output of the Origenistas and the Grupo de Renovación Musical as Cuban art. However, this Cuban art structured two largely separate spheres of expression; it was formed not through the union of African and European heritage but by sustaining them as distinct. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (1994, 6–10) have pointed out that syncretic processes can be reversible: “synthesis, adaptations, assemblages, incorporations or appropriations are renegotiated and sometimes denied and disassembled.” Moreover, both syncretism and anti-syncretism can be mobilized for the construction of authenticity and identity. The 1920s and 1930s produced a drive toward the construction of *mestizaje*. In response, the 1940s and 1950s gave way to more cautious approaches to *lo negro*, revealing impulses within the Cuban art community to de-syncretize *lo cubano*.

## Conclusion

The debates that took place within Cuba’s art community over the use of *lo negro* to create national art were a privileged realm through which conflict over *lo negro* unfolded. Cuban artists and cultural policymakers responded in different ways to the appropriation of *lo negro* for constructing ideals of racial harmony such as *mestizaje* via the arts. In general, some state cultural administrators sporadically argued for the use of *lo negro* as a flavoring element within elite Western-influenced Cuban art. State cultural officials seemed oblivious to criticisms of the appropriation dynamics involved in Afro-Cubanist-influenced art. As Alejandro de la Fuente and Rafael Cardoso (forthcoming) suggest, it is not that the subalterns are “silent,” it is that those in power do not listen to them. The limited state support for *mestizaje* might also be related to the overall awareness of cultural administrators about criticisms after the late 1930s of Afro-Cubanist-related creations. Distancing cultural policy from *mestizaje* curtailed the advancement of Afro-Cuban culture and ultimately facilitated the empowerment of a white, elite *cubanidad*. In turn, Afro-Cubans interpreted the appropriation of their cultural heritage in divergent ways. Some Afro-Cuban intellectuals noted the benefits achieved with the nationalization of black culture and therefore supported the use of *lo negro* for the creation of national

<sup>55</sup> Joaquín Texidor, “Magia y vitalismo,” 14–15.

<sup>56</sup> Joaquín Texidor, “IV Salón Nacional de Pintura y Escultura,” *Revista Estudios*, 1950, newspaper clipping, personal archive of Roberto Diago (grandson).

art. Others, however, countered the appropriation of *lo negro*, disclosing the ongoing marginalization of Afro-Cubans and the misrepresentation of their culture. Constructing notions of authenticity that circumscribed *lo negro* to black artists, some Afro-Cubans mobilized *lo negro* as a category of belonging grounded on expressive freedom.

The generation of white artists and intellectuals who became established in the 1940s and the 1950s was generally critical of AfroCubanismo's approach to black culture, which they considered exotic and superficial. In this way they reinforced existing discourses that constructed *lo negro* as a category of belonging that was best expressed by Afro-Cuban artists. Surely, their turn to a Western "universal" expression was embedded in racist notions of alleged white cultural superiority that went largely unquestioned at the time. However, this work shows that their preference for "*lo universal*" was not simply a racist push against *lo negro*, as it has been previously understood. It was a more complex development that was shaped, at least in part, by the artists' awareness of the racist dimensions and problematic power dynamics of AfroCubanista-influenced production, which they rejected.

Ultimately, *lo negro* came to function as a form of property, the ownership of which could be fought over and contested. As E. Patrick Johnson (2003, 2–3) explains, blackness has no owner; instead, "individuals or groups appropriate this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries." The challenges to AfroCubanista-influenced appropriations of *lo negro* opened divergent creative paths within national arts. Some black intellectuals and artists claimed black art for black artists; some white artists embraced elite Hispanic heritage as their main creative language while valorizing some Afro-Cuban artists' recreations of *lo negro*. In conclusion, challenges to the appropriation of *lo negro* in national art helped to further disarticulate *mestizaje* into more anti-syncretic modes of artistic expression.

Nevertheless, the debates about the use of *lo negro* to make Cuban art reveal an intellectual movement within Cuba's artistic community. The controversy over whether *lo negro* was part of Cuban culture, widely debated during the 1920s and 1930s, was fading. By the 1940s the work of Afro-Cubans, AfroCubanista artists, and white intellectuals such as Fernando Ortiz had established the centrality of Afro-Cuban culture to the nation; the significance of *lo negro* to *cubanidad* was largely accepted. Instead, the debates refocused on establishing the limits and parameters of *lo negro* as it was mobilized to constitute or challenge hegemonic notions of *cubanidad*.

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**Cary Aileen García Yero** is Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of History at the University of Toronto, and Affiliate of the Research Cluster on Comparative Inequality and Inclusion in the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. Her research interests include Afro-Latin American art, race relations in the Americas, Cuban history, Cold War history, and cultural theory. García Yero's work has been supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Afro-Latin American Research Institute, and the David Rockefeller Center at Harvard University, among others. Her work appears in journals such as *Studies in Latin America Popular Culture*, *Epicenter*, and *Cuban Studies*.

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