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Exploraciones/Explorations

Sarita and the Revolution: Race and Cuban Cinema

Haseenah Ebrahim

In recent years, Cuban cinema has received increasing scholarly attention and, quite deservedly, accolades for decades of politically committed and stylistically innovative filmmaking as part of a committed project to undertake a 'decolonization of the screens' (Chanan 1985, 275). This essay explores questions of race and ethnicity in relation to Cuban cinema during the height of the Revolution, focusing in particular on one filmmaker, the late Sara Gómez. In this essay, I argue that while contemporary filmmakers in Cuba have benefited from a growing acceptance of African heritage as an integral component of Cuban culture, Sara Gómez's interest in exploring matters of racial inequalities in the Revolutionary Cuba of the 1960s and '70s forced her to negotiate a rather challenging political and social milieu in which official attitudes frowned upon the acknowledgement of racial discrimination as a contemporary phenomenon.

For many years, Cuba was the only Caribbean country with any kind of motion picture output of note. In fact, Cuba today has an established history of indigenous film production, resulting from the Castro government's active support of Lenin's notion of film as the 'most important art'. The Castro government set up the infrastructure for the construction of a film industry to serve the needs of a Revolutionary Cuba in March 1959, less than three months after it came to power, by establishing the *Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC), often referred to (in English) as the Cuban Film Institute.

Over the next fifteen years, Cuban cinema produced a respected corpus of feature films, documentaries and shorts. Under the supervision of the ICAIC, Cuban cinema developed an aesthetic identity very much attuned to, and aligned with, the political and ideological developments of the early Revolutionary period. This included the 'Imperfect Cinema' aesthetic, as espoused by Cuban filmmaker, Julio García Espinosa, which argued against the dangers of attempting to imitate the elaborate production values of the First World's mainstream cinemas at the expense of content.

The precise ethnic make-up of Cuba's 11 million population is uncertain, with sources varying considerably in their estimations, most indicating Cuba's population as being predominantly (51 per cent) mixed race (black/white), but some showing it as predominantly white. Blacks are estimated to comprise 11 or 12 per cent.[1] On the other hand, in 1990, 84 per cent of Cubans living in the United States classified themselves as 'white' (de la Fuenta 1995, 144).

Whatever the precise demographics, there appears to be a consensus that Cuba is not a 'white' society. Scholars such as Lourdes Casal have argued that Cuban 'culture is [...] undoubtedly Afro-Hispanic', noting the influence of African and black cultural elements in Cuban music, proverbs and sayings, religion, poetry and

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the arts. Even Castro, in a speech in April 1976, stated 'We are a Latin African people', (Casal 1989, 484). Sergio Giral, an AfroCuban director now living in the U.S., has argued that the African presence in Cuban culture is so much a part of the collective unconscious that the actors portraying slaves required no instruction in the African religious dances performed in his films.[2]

However, open recognition of the African contributions to Cuban society was, for many years, contrary to Cuba's official colour-blindness and silence on racial issues, although it had been invoked by Castro during Cuba's involvement in African conflicts. The rationale behind this stance lay in a belief that no racial discrimination existed in Cuba – the elimination of class privileges having eliminated racial discrimination. The last vestiges of *legal* race discrimination had been removed when in March 1959, Castro made an announcement that came to be known as the Proclamation against Discrimination, in which he declared racial discrimination and racial prejudice to be 'anti-nation'.[3] The dominant ideology of Revolutionary Cuba was, therefore, that there are no whites or blacks – just Cubans (citing national hero, Jose Martí).

Alejandro de la Fuente (1995) notes that the Revolutionary government's understanding of a racially unequal society was that it reflected a series of contradictions in the economic and social structure, which generated a number of inequalities typical of a class-based society. As such, the issue of racial discrimination and its institutional elimination was achieved by eliminating class inequalities in general, by socializing the means of production and social services. Since blacks and mulattos were over-represented among the poor and working-class sectors, structural changes benefited these groups in a manner that eliminated, or greatly reduced, many racial inequalities.

In his analysis of how the Revolution has affected racial inequalities, de la Fuente (1995, 161) notes that 'with regard to several important social indicators, racial inequality has disappeared in Cuba. This is true with regard to education – measured not only in terms of literacy – as well as to some important demographic indicators, such as fertility and mortality'. Nevertheless, criticisms persist about the continued prevalence of cultural racism, such as the pervasive use of white symbols in magazines and the low proportion of blacks and mulattos in government and party leadership positions.

There appears to be a general agreement, however, with the sentiments expressed by Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs (1993, 7) who argue that 'few countries can boast the advances made in Cuba since the Cuban Revolution in breaking down institutionalized racism. It would, however, be shortsighted to think that racism has been eliminated'. In addition, some observers argue that since the 1980s, Fidel Castro has been more ready to acknowledge racial inequalities in Cuban society, despite resistance from some of his key advisers. Eugène Godfried (2000, 1), a radio journalist with Radio Havana, argues:

> In September 2000, the President of Cuba again raised the topic of racial discrimination and marginalization, admitting the Revolutionary process is not a perfect model that has solved all problems of inequality and injustice. In itself this was a victory by Fidel Castro over all those tendencies surrounding him who seem to wish to silence dialogue on this issue.

Godfried does, however, take issue with Castro's use of the term 'ethnic minorities', questioning whether the 'Iberian-Spanish element, in racial terms otherwise

classified as "whites" are in the majority in Cuba'. In addition, Godfried notes that beyond questions of socioeconomic marginalization, AfroCubans face '*cultural marginality* as a consequence of the supremacy of the Iberian-Hispanic values and norms in education, culture, economics and politics' (2000, 2). Many observers insist, however, that in Cuba, racial categorization of artists and writers does not function to exclude any group from inclusion in the term 'Cuban', nor does it minimize the scope of their achievements or contributions. In present-day Cuba, increasing openness in acknowledging the pervasiveness of African influences on Cuban culture permits AfroCuban cultural expression to be fully accepted as *Cuban* cultural expression, since much of what is Cuban is actually African in origin. As Barnard (1993, 233) notes with regard to music in particular, this reflects a major shift in conceptions of Cuban identity. Prior to the Revolution in particular, but persisting even afterwards, '(white) cultural elitists periodically decried the black, foreign or popular contamination of their canon, blissfully unaware that the "authentic" musical tradition they sought to preserve was itself almost invariably the product of such cross-fertilisation'.

During the early Revolutionary period, however, under the auspices of the ICAIC, filmmakers had to tread warily with regard to explicit acknowledgment of ethnicity in the context of a Marxist consciousness that privileged class dynamics as a site for exploration of social contradictions. *In Cuban cinema, racial oppression could be acknowledged if explored as a historical occurrence, a problem of the past***.** Thus a number of films dealt with slavery.

The confiscation of the short documentary, by the ICAIC, *P.M.* (1961), reveals the discomfort Cuban authorities felt about attempts to explore racial inequalities in post-Revolutionary Cuba. The then head of the ICAIC, Alfred Guevara, justified the confiscation on the grounds that *P.M*. depicted 'a world inhabited by the mainly black and mulatto lumpenproletariat. Obviously it wasn't made out of any feeling of racial discrimination, but the presentation of these images at this time was nonetheless questionable' (Chanan 1985, 101). That it was the attempts to conduct analyses of racial inequalities in contemporary Cuba that aroused unease is borne out by the fact that neither Eduardo Manet's *El Negro* (1960), a history of racial discrimination in Cuba from the time of slavery up to the Revolution (and the Revolution's condemnation of racism), nor Nestor Almendros' *Ritmo de Cuba* (1960) which discusses AfroCuban folk music, ran afoul of the authorities, while Sara Gómez's *Crónica de mi familia* (1966*)* did, as discussed later in this essay.

Even in later films, however, racist attitudes are depicted under specific conditions that do not acknowledge racism in *contemporary* Cuba. For example, in Jesús Díaz's feature film *Lejanía/Parting of the Ways* (1985), racism is portrayed as part of a counter-Revolutionary and/or regressive consciousness; in other words, it reflects the views of a Cuban-*American*. A white Cuban exile from the U.S. returns to Havana to see the son she had abandoned twenty years previously; the woman's racism is made apparent in her pointed enquiry regarding the racial purity of her son's wife, questioning whether she 'is 100 per cent'. Asserting that her family has never had one of 'them' before (the wife is mulatta), her racism is depicted as being imported by Cuban Americans. The scene thus also functions as a commentary about race relations in the U.S., identifying the perception of Cuban-Americans – most self-identifying as 'white' – as virulently racist.

Official disapproval of racism in Cuba was mirrored in an official disapproval of patriarchy, but unlike racial discrimination, the Cuban Revolution has been

much more active and public in addressing gender issues. Consequently, Cuban cinema has produced a number of films dealing with gender oppression. Feature films focusing on women and gender inequalities include Humberto Solas's three-part *Lucía* (1969), Sara Gómez's *One Way or Another* (1974/1977), Pastor Vegas's *Portrait of Teresa* (1979), and Tomas Gutiérrez Alea's *Up To a Certain Point*, among others.

While gender inequities have not been eradicated within the Cuban context, the official stance permitted – and resulted – in active efforts to provide a more egalitarian social context for Cuban women. This has not been the case with regard to racial inequalities, a neglect mirrored in Cuban cinema generally. Except for a few instances, race has not been explored by filmmakers who are/were not themselves black; even among these films only a select few (such as Tomas Gutiérrez Alea's *La ultima cena/The Last Supper*) have received critical attention. This does not mean that there were no films about AfroCubans. Pick (1993, 131) states that while 'a great number of documentaries [...] dealt with the syncretic origins of popular music and drew biographical portraits of black performers, feature films took a historical perspective'. Despite addressing the prevalence of machismo in Cuban culture from the beginning, neither the Revolution nor Cuban cinema attempted to explore patriarchy as complicated by race, except in the case of Sara Gómez's *One Way or Another*.

No study of Cuban cinema can ignore the contributions of Sara Gómez Yera, whose feature film, *De cierta mañera/One Way or Another* (1974/1977), was hailed as a paradigmatic example of Third World cinefeminism by feminist film critics in North America and Europe (see Lesage 1979, Kuhn 1982, Kaplan 1983. In her tragically short lifetime, Sara Gómez, affectionately known to her friends as Sarita, was Cuba's only black woman filmmaker.[4] To date, only three of ICAIC's feature film directors have been black – Sara Gómez was the only black woman.[5] Born in Havana in 1943, Gómez was raised in a middle-class black family. After studying music, literature and ethnography, she joined ICAIC in 1961.

As is generally required by ICAIC, Gómez served a long period of apprenticeship. Between 1964 and 1973, she directed a number of documentaries, on a variety of topics, ranging in length from as little as nine minutes to forty-one minutes before shooting her only feature film, *One Way or Another*. She never completed it. In 1974, she died during postproduction as the result of an asthma attack. She was 31 years old. The film was finally released in 1977.

Sara Gómez's work displays a recurring concern with the issue of race, and with the significance of African contributions to popular Cuban culture, yet scholarly analyses mention her work mainly in the context of gender.[6] Gómez's directorial debut was *Iré a Santiago/ I Shall Go to Santiago* (1964), a short documentary on that most AfroCuban of cities, Santiago de Cuba. A series of short segments capture various aspects of life in Santiago, including the beat of carnival, an event which Brea and Millet (1994/5) describe as 'a phenomenon which culturally defines the city'. The significance of the carnival for the people of Santiago is considerable, and its African origins and influence reflect the city's populace and cultural leanings.

Carlos Moore (1988) condemned the official silence on racial issues in Cuba as itself being racist in nature, accusing the Castro government of 'negrophobia' because it has been particularly repressive of AfroCuban religious/cultural practices. However, the Castro government's disapproval of AfroCuban religious practices

simply continued a long history of such repression with official prohibition of African dancing, 'large drums and indecent contortions' in parades and carnivals going as far back as the early twentieth century following Cuban 'independence' from Spain (Brea and Millett 1994/5). The notion that AfroCuban practices are socially backward persisted in Revolutionary Cuba constituting, in fact, the official attitude. But Gómez's treatment of the Santiago carnival challenges this official disapproval by celebrating its texture and vitality.

Many black Cubans who supported the Revolution were reluctant to acknowledge their ethnicity out of fear it would undermine their desire to be 'just Cubans', or feared it would distract attention from the goals of the Revolution.[7] Sara Gómez was not one of them. In tributes paid to her in a special commemorative issue of *Cine Cubano* in 1990, a recurring characterization is that of Gómez as outspoken, bold, caustic, provocative and controversial. Many note Gómez's willingness to challenge received wisdom, and to bring to the surface many of the unspoken contradictions of Revolutionary Cuba, even as she supported and celebrated its achievements. Still, Gómez worked *within* the framework of a socialist mode of production that saw itself as being in the service of the Revolution. There is no reason to doubt that she was an enthusiastic supporter of the Cuban Revolution and believed in its ideals.

Sara Gómez had to negotiate a delicate balance between her own desire to not only acknowledge her blackness but to foreground the African cultural heritage in Cuba, including analyses of the complex (some have called it schizophrenic) attitudes to African-ness in Cuban society on the one hand, and her support of Revolutionary ideals which discouraged such acknowledgments on the other. As a result, Sara Gómez's willingness to take on issues frowned upon by the Revolution sometimes received official censure.

For example, in 1966 Gómez tackled the subject of hidden racial secrets within her own family in *Guanabacoa: Crónica de mi familia/ Chronicle of My Family*. Tomás González (1993, 132-3), a close friend and collaborator states:

> Nobody went untouched as she demystified the unholy and told the story of what had been pushed to the back of the closet through mulatto ideology and its petit-bourgeois pretensions. Her poetic *Crónica de mi familia* **(**Chronicle of My Family) came from digging into drawers, coffers, trunks and charcoal etchings. Sara bared all that the family had wanted to cast into deep oblivion [...] [including an] aunt with the religion of a *santera* and the culture of an ex-prostitute [...] The scandal it created was a preamble to her marvellous documentary *Mi aporte* (My part), a biting attack on class postures, especially those of the petit-bourgeois.

Neither of these two documentaries mentioned by González is listed in the filmography published in the previously mentioned Special Commemorative issue of *Cine Cubano* dedicated to 'Sarita' (1990), nor are they mentioned in the only English-language publications that provide a substantial analysis of her documentaries, Michael Chanan's *The Cuban Image* (1985) and *Cuban Cinema* (2004*)*. My curiosity aroused, I eventually found a possible explanation in a newspaper review of the 1990 Creteil Festival of Women's Films which, in that year, presented a tribute to Latin American women filmmakers, foremost among them Sara Gómez. The Paris-based *Le Monde* noted that *Crónica de mi familia* had been prohibited distribution by Cuban censors upon its completion and remained prohibited until a recent retro-

spective on Cuban cinema in Beauborg, France. According to *Le Monde*, the personal nature of *Crónica de mi familia* and its concerns upset Cuban censors, more accustomed at the time to political documentaries in the service of the Revolution than to introspection.

As noted earlier, neither Manet's *El Negro* (1960), a history of racial discrimination in Cuba from the time of slavery up to the Revolution and its official condemnation of racism, nor Almendros' *Ritmo de Cuba* (1960) on AfroCuban folk music elicited the disapproval of the authorities – but then they did not make any allusions to racism in post-Revolution Cuba either. Michael Chanan, the most renowned scholar on Cuban cinema – whose sympathies with the Cuban Revolution are openly acknowledged – notes of the two 'missing' documentaries, that 'they remain in the archives unseen. I suspect, from what people have said to me, that they deal with questions of racism in a way that made the Party establishment rather too uncomfortable'.[8] Gómez, nevertheless, *again* touches on the subject of racism in the documentary, *Una isla para Miguel* (1968), which, significantly, was produced two years after *Crónica de mi familia*, as well as in another documentary entitled *El otra isla.*

Gómez's only feature film, *De cierta mañera*, has as its central premise the relationship between a couple in which the male is part of the secret, exclusively male, AfroCuban religion of Abakuá, and the woman a middle-class teacher. Formally, *One Way or Another* combines fictional sequences with documentary analyses of urban poverty and associated cultural traditions. *One Way or Another's* daring experimentation with cinematic techniques drew attention to Gómez's readiness to question conventional approaches and perspectives. Not only does the film question documentary and fictional techniques and schisms – unconventional at the time – and provide parallel interrogations of class, gender and race, the film avoids the conventional tendency towards narrative closure. The film ends with neither of the conflicts – between Mario and Yolanda, and between Mario and Humberto – resolved.

Some of the earliest analyses in North American scholarship of *One Way or Another* came from feminist film critics. Marxist feminists such as Julia Lesage (1979, 22) commended the film for its dialectical Revolutionary structure, and argued that 'the film's "feminism" lies in the way that it attributes sincere emotional interactions to its *male* characters and considers a profound and sincere emotional life important for men's, especially Mario's, Revolutionary development'.

Although *One Way or Another* is now considered a classic of both Latin American and feminist cinema, feminist film discourse relating to *One Way or Another* continues to be characterized by an effacement of the question of race, resulting, I would argue, from a tendency by Euro-American feminists to privilege gender over other axes of oppression such as race and class.[9] Admittedly, *One Way or Another* itself both articulates and effaces issues of race, sometimes in complex ways. While class and gender conflicts are explicitly addressed, race remains a subtext. In scenes depicting the tensions arising out of class differences between the middle-class teacher, Yolanda, and the mothers of the children she teaches, Gómez acknowledges that the marginalized sector in Cuba comprises primarily black and mulatto Cubans. Gómez's articulation of the racial underpinnings of the socioeconomic hierarchy is reflected in her casting rather than through explicit dialogue or themes.

The element of race is underscored in the narrative by the fact that the rele-

vance of Abakuá for Mario emerges from his identity as a black/mulatto man. The film depicts two AfroCuban religions, Abakuá and Santería. The Abakuá brotherhood, until recently, was not open to whites, and for many years it was presented by the news media in Cuba as a secret society out to kill whites. Santería (or *regla de ocha*) is the dominant form of AfroCuban religious expression and is a syncretic form combining Yoruba and Catholic imagery. A most common convergence in such syncretic religions in the Caribbean is the association between African deities and Catholic saints, so that in Santería, for example, the Yoruba god of thunder, Shango, is associated with the Catholic Saint Barbara and the Virgin Mary with Erzulie-Fréda, the goddess of love, and so on.[10]

Julia Lesage's (1979) characterization of Abakuá as 'voodoo' and her confusion of the saints (of Santería), belonging to Mario's mother, with the practices of Abakuá lead her to conclude that that Gómez disapproved of all AfroCuban religious practices as regressive. Ironically, a feminist analysis such as Lesage's fails to identify what is, in fact, a gendered depiction of two AfroCuban religions due to a failure to understand the racial/cultural underpinnings of the phenomena being depicted.

One Way or Another's explicit disapproval of the exclusively male secret society of Abakuá – founded on the notion of woman-as-betrayer – is not apparent in the depiction of the more egalitarian Santería, the religion observed by Mario's mother. Abakuá is depicted in a distinctly ethnographic mode of presentation, unlike Santería, which is integrated into the narrative without the supposition that it requires additional comment or analysis. Gómez does not present Santería in a manner that underscores its alienness from mainstream Cuban religious beliefs, but does so in the case of Abakuá. Lesage's reduction of both Abakuá and Santería to some vague notion of seemingly atavistic AfroCuban religious practice – part of a larger and equally unspecific notion of Afro-Caribbean religions she classifies as 'voodoo' – is also likely to tap into existing negative connotations associated in the Western mind with *that* much maligned religion. It might be added that Voodoo is neither depicted nor referred to in *One Way or Another.*

The casting of a light-skinned female protagonist is not by accident either. Catherine Benamou (1994, 57) notes that throughout the body of 'men's films about women' (with a few exceptions, notably the work of Humberto Solas and Sergio Giral), this pattern of casting is prominent in Cuban film. Benamou argues:

> The casting of prominent female protagonists echoes that of the male characters in that regardless of class or level of Revolutionary/feminist consciousness they are predominantly white, ranging at most to light mulattoes in phenotype. Since these are the men and women who have been chosen to 'struggle' on the screen, the issue of race as a co-determinant of women's self-perception and social treatment is significantly elided.

Why, one cannot help but ask, would Gómez, herself a black woman, perpetuate this pattern of casting? In recalling his first conversation with Gómez regarding *One Way or Another*, Tomás González (1993, 133), who co-wrote the script, notes that Gómez believed that a film with a black woman protagonist in a contemporary setting would be ill-advised ('it would be too much') in 1970s Cuba. It is worth noting that ICAIC has always been predominantly white, and Gómez had already encountered disapproval of her documentary *Crónica de mi familia* at this point. It is likely that she would have known of the objections to *P.M.,* or at least surmised

that the open admission of race as a determinant of social status would be frowned upon. Or, perhaps the phrase 'it would be too much' suggests that she believed that Cuban audiences would not find a black woman protagonist appealing?

Sergio Giral (1996) suggests that Gómez may have felt that a black protagonist would not have been popular with Cuban audiences, whose notion of beauty and desirability is generally invested in the iconic image of the mulatta.[11] Kutzinski (1993, 21) observes that Cuban society encoded its national identity in the iconic figure of a mulatta, the copper-skinned Virgin of Charity, the Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre – Cuba's patron saint – and in numerous images of mulattas in the country's literature and popular culture. 'Cuban novelists were particularly fascinated by women of ambiguous racial origin'. All of this 'high symbolic or cultural visibility' notes Kutzinski (7), nevertheless, 'contrasts sharply with social invisibility' of the mulatta. Thus, it may be that the casting of Yolanda simply reflects what is frequently a parallel, though not always congruent, relationship between class and race. After all, Gómez was herself black *and* middle-class.

Gómez died in 1974 of an asthma attack while *One Way or Another* was in post-production. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Julio García Espinosa completed the film, which was eventually released in 1977.[12] Two years after Gómez's death, another black woman joined ICAIC. Gloria Rolando never knew Gómez personally, but acknowledges that her work and her reputation has been an inspiration to her own desire to use the cinematic medium to explore the African elements of Cuban society. In fact, all of her own work, including the award-winning documentary *Oggun*, deals with *Afro*Cuban issues.

Despite the tributes paid to Sara Gómez (as in the special issue of *Cine Cubano* dedicated to her), and despite her own 20-year apprenticeship at ICAIC, Rolando, was unable to obtain consent from ICAIC to produce a documentary on Sara Gómez or to get any of her other projects greenlighted.[13] As a result, Rolando left a financially stable career at ICAIC to pursue her commitment to making films about AfroCuban and African Diaspora experiences for which she had not found a space within the structures of ICAIC. Her decision to work independently of ICAIC has provided her the freedom to direct several documentaries and one short fictional film.

The fact that Rolando has been able to work as an independent filmmaker is, of course, an option that was not open to Gómez. This independent sector has been tolerated only since the more open political climate of the 1990s in Cuba, but it is a sector that works in video since ICAIC controls all distribution of film stock and postproduction facilities for film. In addition, Rolando's work – some of which has been shown on Cuban television – reflects a growing movement to integrate ethnicity, especially African heritage, into Cuban cultural expression. In addition to her own work centering AfroCuban heritage, a documentary by fellow AfroCuban filmmaker, Rigoberto López Pego, *Mensajero de los dioses*/*Messengers of the Gods* (1989) explores AfroCuban cultural identity through an examination of drumming rituals in Santería. Lopez's earlier *El viaje más largo/The Longest Journey* (1988) explores the history and significance of the Chinese presence in Cuban society (and in recent years several documentaries have emerged about the Jewish presence in Cuba). Sergio Giral's feature film, *María Antonia* (1991), similarly explores the cult of Oshun in the slums of Havana.

Gómez's *One Way or Another* situates both Santería and Abakuá in its sociohistorical context, as does Giral's *María Antonia*, based on a play by Eugenio

Hernández (Chanan 2004, 450). *María Antonia*'s protagonist is a woman defying the *santeros* in attempting to chart her own destiny. Chanan (2004, 450) notes of *María Antonia*: 'Deeply rooted in the Santería it portrayed, the play had been shelved after it first opened in 1967, until the period of dogmatism passed and it was rehabilitated [...]'. Chanan goes on to argue that the film, made prior to Giral leaving Cuba in 1991, '[...] represents a challenge to the ideological orthodoxy that persists in considering this world as a marginal one, when it can also be said that its survival marks it as one of the most deeply characteristic features of Cuban popular culture'.

While both films integrate AfroCuban religious practices into the narrative by presenting them as an important part of the lives of certain characters, neither is celebratory nor condemnatory of the practices depicted. The more recent documentaries, however, clearly reflect a recent trend in Cuban cinema to celebrate AfroCuban religious practices – but they do so without providing any type of social, historical or political contextualization. Nor do any of these films present an analysis of racial inequalities or racial discrimination in post-Revolution Cuba. This lack of contextualization and the reluctance to confront the history – and, therefore, also the potential – of AfroCuban religions as sites of *political* subversion has led to accusations that they have been folklorized and desacralized.[14] Arguably, such lack of contextualization also signals a recognition of such practices as normal, i.e., not *necessitating* any contextualization as a result of the pervasiveness of AfroCuban religious practices in Cuban life.

As a result of changes in the 1990s in Cuban official policy towards freedom of religious expression, there has been a proliferation of AfroCuban activities and artifacts in Cuba including conferences, documentaries, T-shirts bearing the names of *orishas* and a historical soap opera (*Passion and Prejudice*) in which the 'central characters are "good" ñáñigos' – a phenomenon that Martínez-Echazabál (1994, 19) decries as 'reducing viable and integrated social phenomena to exotic fragments for tourist and popular consumption', and 'de-secularizing AfroCuban culture and relocating it in a [...] space which the State [...] had only seemed to acknowledge when relegated to the historical or to the aesthetic realms, and now to the commodified one'.[15] Increased official acknowledgement, however, may simply reflect the State's response to charges of racism (and its own sensitivity to such charges) and the increasing visibility of a broader AfroCuban cultural movement (that includes, for example, the growing popularity of rap and Hip Hop) by an increasing openness – both on the economic and cultural fronts.

Despite continuing gaps in Cuban cinema, such as the reluctance to explore race as a site of unequal power relations, the achievements of the Revolution cannot be denied – both in terms of improving the access of ordinary Cubans to medical care, education and literacy, as well as its prominent role in the development of a cinematic tradition that has earned Cuban cinema a high degree of respect for its cinematic innovation and revolutionary consciousness. ICAIC's role in transforming Cuba from a country of cinematic consumption to one of cinematic production cannot be underestimated. Despite some of the problems associated with ICAIC's control of cinematic production, Gómez, a black woman, was able to emerge as a highly respected filmmaker within its institutional context. The reasons why no other woman has followed in her footsteps to direct a feature-length fictional film is unclear. The recent emergence of an independent video movement, however, and ICAIC's own increasing willingness to confront taboos relating to homosexuality

(Alea's *Strawberry and Chocolate*) and ethnicity, and to produce critiques of excessive bureaucracy, suggest an optimistic outlook for the future of Cuban cinema.

The consequences of the 'special period' of the 1990s for Cuban cinema is that the scarcity of resources has resulted in drastic reductions in the resources the country can allocate to film production and distribution. This has led to a dramatic reduction in film production by ICAIC and a more concerted effort to develop coproductions with other countries. Whereas Cuba produced 13 feature films in 1985, this figure had dropped to two by 1993, including the taboo-breaking *Fresa y chocolate/Strawberry and Chocolate*, based on a short story by Senel Paz who also wrote the screenplay. Directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabio, the film was made possible only as a coproduction with Spain and Mexico (Agosta and Keeton 1994; UNESCO 1993).[16]

In the past decade, Cuban feature film production has entered an era in which, after decades of state support, the highly respected Cuban film industry faces, once again, a future in which it will have to reproduce itself through revenues generated within a system of global commercial competition.

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Notes

1. Many of the statistics reflect the official 1981 Cuban census figures. Many sources refer to the population as being predominantly mulatto, meaning racially mixed. Cuba conducted a census in 2002, but no longer documents racial classification of its population.
2. Sergio Giral made the remarks on 20 April 1996 at the African Film Festival, Visions II held at Columbia College in Chicago.
3. The degree of racism prevalent in pre-Revolutionary Cuba can be ascertained from the fact that Batista, even as Cuba's president, was barred from Cuba's exclusively white upper-class clubs and associations because he was what Cubans called a *mulatto avanzado*, a very light-skinned mulatto. Although Fidel Castro is the illegitimate child of a married white (reportedly also virulently racist) Spanish immigrant and his mulatta servant, he is generally considered white (Brock and Cunningham 1991). Unless specifically referred to as Raúl Castro, references to Castro are to Fidel.
4. According to Paranagua (1990), despite the widely held belief that Sara Gómez was the only woman filmmaker in Cuba during her lifetime, she was the only *black* woman filmmaker. Paranagua names Rosina Prado as a woman who had already begun to tackle issues relating to women in a film called *Palmas Cubanas* (1963). This was confirmed by Enrique Pineda-Barnet (1997), a Cuban filmmaker who joined ICAIC in 1963.
5. AfroCuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando, who works independently of ICAIC, produced her first fictional film, shot on video, in 2001. Although fictional, it is based on an historical event, the 1912 massacre of over 6,000 members of the Independents of Color, the hemisphere's first black political party outside Haiti. Although its publicity refers to it as a feature film, it is only 50 min. long.
6. (See Kaplan 1983, Kuhn 1982, Lopez 1990). This is probably due to the emphasis given to the one feature film she directed, even though *One Way or Another* explores race, class *and* gender and their interconnections.
7. This was also the prevalent ideology in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa among the

different ethnic/racial groups constituting the political category of 'black'.

8. The second documentary Chanan is referring to is *Mi aporte*. The comments were made in an email correspondence with the author on 15 November 1997.
9. However, in *One Way or Another* the question of class is an explicit concern of the narrative, making it less easy to ignore.
10. This association does not reflect a simple sharing of traits by these deities and saints. Erzulie-Fréda, for example, is a complex contradiction, both loving and tender, but also willful, indifferent, demanding, even savage. See Dayan (1994).
11. Interview with author. Chicago, Illinois, 20 April 1996.
12. González states that Alea and Espinosa had to finish the film, and others (Chanan 1985, 2000) note the additional participation of the AfroCuban documentary filmmaker, Rigoberto Lopez. The film's completion is rumoured to have been plagued by tensions among these (notably all male) filmmakers resulting in the delay of its release. Chanan (2004, 345) cites Alea as stating that the commentary 'was what Sara Gómez herself intended'.
13. This particular conversation between Rolando and the author took place in Chicago, 12 October 1996.
14. While he does not discuss the precise role of *ocha regla*, or Santería, as a site of political subversion, Matthew Hill (1995) outlines four stages in which the religion has passed in the twentieth century – from being a marker of racial/cultural regression, to a signifier of Cuban nationalism, to an archive of power/knowledge in Revolutionary Cuba and finally, of all things, to a symbol of white middle-class status among Miami Cubans.
15. Ñáñigos are the 'little devils' or deities that members of Abakua honour or impersonate. Drewal (1996) has noted that in Brazil too, Afro-Brazilian cultures were forced to operate 'underground' until recent years when Brazilian authorities began exploiting them as a commodity to attract tourist dollars.
16. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea died of cancer in April 1996.

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