Kristina Wirtz

Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History.

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Performing Afro-Cuba is an impressive study of the way stories about the past shape processes of racialization that continue into present-day Cuba. Its examinations of dance, music, festival, religious ritual, and the accompanying visual imagery performed on a variety of Cuban stages constitutes an “anthropological study of history making as a dynamic cultural process of situating subjectivity in space-time” (p. 8) and shows that history is not static. Rather, it is created performatively in our everyday lives; our memories of the past are constantly being subjectively reformed and interpreted through embodied actions. Kristina Wirtz aptly demonstrates that concepts of race and ideologies of racial embodiment “require continued cultural effort to be sustained” (p. 5).

The book is rich with detailed examples about Cuban performances, focusing on the constructions of Blackness, especially in Santiago de Cuba in eastern Cuba. She considers the “figurations of Black characters and associated African or Afro-Cuban cultural forms” (p. 8) and explains that the singers, dancers, and musicians spend many years learning the ability to replicate the rhythms and motions of Cuba’s Black folk traditions. Memory is made manifest through movement, sound, language (lyrics), and the experience of particular spaces. The first three of the book’s seven chapters provide extensive explanations of critical race theory as they apply specifically to Cuba.

Chapter 2, “Image-inations of Blackness,” problematizes existing theorizations of Blackness, especially the ways that Blackness has come to be associated with musical and dance performance in Cuba. “Cultural forms and persons marked as ‘African’ have come to be valued primarily as signs of primordial authenticity and thus become the ‘stuff’ of Cuban folklore” (p. 46), recontextualizing elements drawn from Afro-Cuban religious practice. Wirtz analyzes photos and, interestingly, also drawings of dancers, and considers stereotypes that often emerge in performances, such as the Maroon, the African witch or sorcerer, and the spirit or orisha possessed. These images are framed and keyed in particular ways, and thus, practitioners and audiences may recognize their historical meanings through dress, movement, gesture, and choreography, as well as phenotypes of the dancing bodies themselves (one must look African). Wirtz gives examples from folk religious ceremonies (possession trance), folklore ensembles (choreography, presentation), and amateur neighborhood events, along with illustrators and painters.

Chapter 3 offers a thorough history of definitions and discourses of race from precolonial times into the revolutionary era. It then turns to carnival processions, showing how Blackness and Afro-Cubanidad physically and symbolically move through city streets. Wirtz discusses the act of *arrollándose* (“rolling along”) and its socializing power through the streets of Santiago. She considers how crowds are situated in social spaces and how “weight” is given to the heritage of certain neighborhood routes and their associated *congas*. She examines national myths of *mestizaje*, *mulataje*, *lo Afro*, creole consciousness, and whitening through the history of their participation and describes different types of *comparsas* and their instrumentation—contrasting “official” versus “grassroots” level carnivals and connecting them to Cuban control over civil society.

Chapters 4–7 work more deeply with ethnographic detail. Wirtz takes a look at “Voices,” or the “chronotopic registers and historical imagination in Cuban folk religious festivals” (p. 145). She traces the sound of folkloric Blackness in Cuba through the social recognition and indexing of speech associated with African slaves and African-derived religious practices. “High status” registers of speech, including specialized religious knowledge and African source languages (Yoruba, KiKongo) interact with the so-called “low status” register of Bozal, considered African slave speech. Wirtz explains how Lucumí, Palo jargon, and Bozal tend to index particular ritual domains and voices of Blackness, with distinctions among them tending to be lost and understood as one negatively valorized “Africanized” voice. Chapter 6, “Performances: State-Sponsored Folklore Spectacles of Blackness as History,” provides national context for Afro-Cuban performance in this particular socialist society and situates the performances Wirtz has described in its revolutionary context—folklore as controlled and marketed through its state sponsorship. Chapter 7 focuses more specifically on the “brutology” and theatricality of Bozal language on stage. These latter chapters elaborate on Wirtz’s arguments for chronotopic devices, referring to the mythologies of African princesses, the primacy of the *negra bailadora*, gender and cross dressing, cultural preservation through neighborhood participation, and the teaching of dances, songs, historical context, and heritage to children.

Each chapter of *Performing Afro-Cuba* is packed with fascinating and well-researched material. More of the voices of and perspectives from the performers themselves would have been welcome, especially as Wirtz promises to analyze embodiment and the experience of rhythm, and sound. However, the examples given are intriguing and work well to support her incisive observations. I recommend the book for anyone interested in cultural expression, constructions of racial and ethnic identity, and language, especially for grad-

uate or faculty-level readers. It is an admirable and significant contribution to the growing literature on Cuban history and contemporary culture.

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