BRILL

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE 97 (2023) 1–25

brill.com/nwig

Bola de Nieve

The Antiracist Strategies of an Afro-Cuban Musical Icon

Cary Aileen García Yero
Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany;
Leibniz Universität Hannover, Hannover, Germany
garciayero@fas.harvard.edu

Abstract

This article explores the antiracist strategies of Bola de Nieve, one of Cuba's most renowned yet understudied Afrodescendant musicians of the 1930s *Afrocubanista* movement, to better understand the power and limitations of music as a platform to subvert racist structures. The article reinterprets the possibilities *Afrocubanismo* enabled for Afrodescendant artists, arguing that it allowed for greater antiracist oppositionality than previously thought. Moreover, the work challenges previous assumptions of Bola de Nieve as an Uncle Tom. It unveils the ways in which Bola de Nieve's music was constitutive of Cuban society's racial dynamics. His performances worked as key sites where meanings of music, race, and national imaginaries articulated in powerful ways, expanding the roles and spaces of Afrodescendant performance. Through music, the artist resisted society's efforts to reduce him into confined social categories of race and nation.

Keywords

race – music – Afrocubanismo – Cuba – racial harmony – Bola de Nieve – mestizaje

Bola de Nieve was one of Cuba's most important Afrodescendant musicians of the Afrocubanista generation.[1] His art took him around Latin America, the United States, and Europe on a successful international music career that began

1 I interpret Afrocubanismo as a cultural movement and *zeitgeist* that defined the 1920s and 1930s, and influenced the following decades, when Cuban artists and intellectuals ambigu-

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill NV | DOI:10.1163/22134360-bja10022

in the 1930s and continued until his death in 1971. His fame was so international that he once jokingly mentioned that "[he] was an import product" in his own country.[2] Nicolas Guillén, his friend and one of Cuba's most significant poets, asserted that for a few years, Bola de Nieve was better known in Mexico than on the island (Jacobs 1991:82). Nevertheless, the way Bola de Nieve—as Ignacio Villa was known artistically—was recognized internationally was closely tied to his national roots.[3] When he performed at the Carnegie Hall in New York, at the National Theater in Havana, at the Tchaikovsky Hall in Moscow, among many other important music venues, Bola de Nieve was performing as one of the most distinguished Cuban musicians, "one of the best ambassadors of Cuban culture" (Fajardo Estrada 2011:119; Ojeda 1998:11–15). Like other Afrodescendant performers that emerged in the context of Afrocubanismo in the 1930s, he became a symbol of national pride. He was "*negro*," but "he was culturally a *mulato*, like most of us Cubans" (Díaz, Jacobs & Gemeil 1989:189).[4] When Ignacio Villa sang, he was performing Bola de Nieve, but he was also performing "the Cuban," both abroad and at home.

That "negro," "mulato," and "Cuban" all intersect in references to Bola de Nieve's music should not be surprising. Throughout the twentieth century, Cuba's most prominent intellectuals and scholars, such as Fernando Ortiz and Alejo Carpentier, explained the island's national identity and its musical culture in racial terms (Carpentier 1946; Ortiz 1940).[5] They mobilized music as a

---

ously embraced Afro-Cuban culture as part of national culture for the first time in the nation's history. Other examples of Afro-Cuban performers that emerged during this time were Eusebia Cosme and Rita Montaner, among others. For more on Afrocubanismo, see Moore 1997.

2 Bola de Nieve's interview with Jesús García de Dueñas (1969:57).

3 Ignacio Villa's stage name, Bola de Nieve (Snowball), is very suggestive. It creates an opposite visual image of Villa's round-shaped face. Bola de Nieve remembers how "Rita Montaner, that great artist, had the occurrence of introducing me as Bola de Nieve the day of my debut [in Mexico]. Bola de Nieve was the nickname I was called by the neighborhood children when I was a child. Back then, I didn't like it; today, however, I like it very much because I know that the audience likes it" (Villa, cited in Ojeda 998:35). Even though Bola de Nieve often said he was thankful to Montaner for creating his provocative stage name, Javier Calderón Poveda, Montaner's third husband, who knew Villa closely, believed that "deep down, Ignacio Villa never liked that Rita introduced him to the Mexican audience for the first time as a soloist with the nickname Bola de Nieve. In the beginning maybe he thought that it was funny. He was a young black man who accompanied Rita on the piano; he was nobody. But there was a moment when he thought that he had enough merit to have bigger aspirations. Then Bola de Nieve, internally, began to mean something disdainful and he demanded the use of his real name in some programs" (Fajardo Estrada 2011:107).

4 The racial categories that appear in the quotations are kept untranslated in Spanish as they are used in the sources whenever possible.

5 For contemporary scholarship, see also García 2017 and Wirtz 2014.

symbol of Cuba's *mestizaje*, arguing that the music, like the nation, was formed through the mixing of Hispanic and African heritages.[6] Their enterprise of writing about *cubanidad* through the imbrication of music and race was not unique but part of larger hemispheric intellectual projects that centered on music as a powerful vehicle to understand notions of shared national origins.[7]

In Cuba, the ideal of a racially harmonious nation constructed through *mestizo* musical genres (such as *danzón* and *son*, among others) contrasted with the country's reality of racial discrimination and inequality. As scholars have explained, ideologies of racial harmony such as mestizaje worked ambiguously. Racial equality had become a defining principle of the country's social and political life that was protected by the 1940 Constitution and defended at the highest levels of government. By the 1940s, Afro-Cuban activism through working class and political organizations had resulted in some improvements in areas such as employment, salary, and job benefits. Nevertheless, indicators such as health, education, and housing revealed high levels of continued racial inequality. Within this background, some Cubans mobilized notions of racial harmony to demand racial justice and the inclusion of Afrodescendants in society, pointing to the nation's promised yet unachieved equality. Others problematically contended that these ideals were accomplished feats, despite evidence to the contrary. As such, racist efforts to silence racism were often accompanied by the argument that racial harmony and equality had already been achieved.[8] Due to Bola de Nieve's high profile as a renowned and beloved international Afro-Cuban musician, he was more than a mere participant within the coun-

6 I define *mestizaje* as the ambiguous national ideology that solidified in the 1920s and 1930s on the island, which aimed to problematically construct the nation as a harmonious homogenous body constituted by racial mixing, while silencing racism and inequality. Some musicians, such as Eduardo Sánchez de Fuentes, in a racist stand against *lo negro*, aimed to distance Cuban culture from its African contributions by arguing that cubanidad was constituted not by African but by Hispanic and indigenous legacies. By the 1940s, however, this argument had been largely discredited and the notion of Cuban mestizaje as formed through its African and Hispanic heritage had become hegemonic. While Cuba has been associated with the term *mulataje*, the term mestizaje was important within the discourse of the time, used often by Afro-Cubans and important intellectuals such as Alejo Carpentier and Fernando Ortiz. The concept of mestizaje has also been recurrently used in contemporary scholarship on Cuban culture and race (see de la Fuente 2001; Duno Gottberg 2003; Fraunhar 2018; Kutzinski 1993). For mestizaje in Latin America, see among others Birkenmaier 2016, Miller 2004, and Reid Andrews 2004.

7 Chasteen 2004; García 2017; Radano & Bohlman 2000; Wade 2000.

8 For a comprehensive study of race in Cuba's twentieth century, see Benson 2016, Bronfman 2004, and de la Fuente 2001. For an account of labor mobilization and state formation, see Domínguez 1978 and MacGillivray 2009.

try's complex racial dynamics. This article shows how his performances worked as key sites where meanings of music, race, and national imaginaries were articulated in powerful ways.[9]

Zooming in on Bola de Nieve's music, this article contributes to recent scholarship that has studied the centrality of music to racial formation processes.[10] Scholars have demonstrated the ways in which music has been an important signifier of racial difference, and vice versa, how ideas of race have shaped perceptions of music and its practices. For instance, musicologist T. Carlis Roberts has explained that music becomes racialized through processes that he calls "sono-racialization: The organization of sound into taxonomies based on racialized conceptions of bodies" (Roberts 2016:4). As these processes unfold, sounds are incorporated into existing racial hierarchies and musics are "mapped" onto race. Linking racialized bodies with particular sounds, in turn, results into "sonic color lines" that further social segregation.[11] In analyzing the articulation of music and race, scholars have consequently documented the antiracist strategies used by Afrodescendant artists to challenge the "sonic color line," as they mobilize performance practices to defy essentializing conceptions of race and music, and to oppose racism.[12]

Within the context of Latin American problematic ideologies of racial harmony, scholars have disagreed on the power of music as a medium through which to pursue social change on issues of race. Some academics, such as Michael Hanchard, have questioned the effectiveness of Afrodescendant music

9 I follow recent developments in musicology and ethnomusicology that depart from traditional analyses that focus on the constitutive elements of music formed by combinations of sounds, intervals, rhythm, harmony, and structural form. Instead, I approach Bola de Nieve's music as a performance complex formed by "human action and interaction," involving practices of listening, embodying, explaining, and identity formation, among other sociomusical processes. See for instance García 2017:5–6 and Madrid & Moore 2013:22–23.

10 I use a variety of sources, such as personal documents and newspaper articles found in the archive of the Museo Nacional de Musica de Cuba (Cuban Museum of National Music), Bola de Nieve File 855, musical recordings, and videos of Bola de Nieve's performances. I also use interviews with Bola de Nieve and other artists who knew him, done by his biographers Miguelito Ojeda and Ramón Fajardo Estrada. They present the interviews in a way that allows the documents to work as primary sources, speaking for themselves (Depestre 1990; Fajardo Estrada 2011; Ojeda 1998).

11 Stoever-Ackerman 2016; see also Hagstrom Miller 2010 and Radano & Bohlman 2000.

12 I define antiracism here as the conscious actions and efforts of Bola de Nieve, performed through several mediums, such as music, dress code, humor, and retort, to counter racist prejudice and systemic oppression in the societies that he was part of. For other studies, see Alberto 2022, García 2017, and Madrid & Moore 2013.

for antiracist activism after this music becomes nationalized (samba, for instance) (Hanchard 1994). Others have explained the ambiguous role that music can play within processes of racial formation, demonstrating both the power as well as the limitations of music to help dismantle racist structures.[13] Robin Moore has noted these contradictions specifically in Bola de Nieve's performances: "As an Afro-Cuban classical musician who became famous for interpreting songs of the white middle classes that depicted black street culture, Ignacio Villa personifies all of the complexities and ironies of *afrocubanismo*" (Moore 1997:138). Bola de Nieve represented a step forward in Cuba's racial dynamics, as he could cross social boundaries of race, class, and gender as a well-known performer. For the first time, a dark-skinned Afro-Cuban achieved fame performing salon repertoire usually reserved for white artists. However, Moore also notes that Bola de Nieve's performances of the *negro catedrático* simultaneously reinforced racist representations of Afro-Cubans. (The *negro catedrático* was a blackface stock character of Cuba's *Teatro Bufo* who pretended to be educated but was instead supposedly foolish and ignorant.) Bola de Nieve's "familiarity with Afro-Cuban street slang enabled him to personify the catedrático with ease … He may have actually internalized some of the stereotypes about Afro-Cubans that he perpetuated on stage" (Moore 1997:138, 174). This article challenges these interpretations, revealing that Bola de Nieve's strategies were much more rebellious than previously thought.

Situated within the context of the Afrocubanista movement and its aftermath, this artist's music brings new light to this pivotal moment in the formation of Cuba's racial culture. His performances are an invitation to reinterpret the possibilities enabled by Afrocubanista-influenced music for antiracist oppositionality. Bola de Nieve's performances challenge previous characterizations of this musician as an "Uncle Tom" who allegedly just catered to please the white middle class and elite sectors.[14] Instead, I explain how his performances were imbued with antiracist intent, furthering scholarly understand-

13 For instance, Marc Herzman has argued that music could bring power to Afrodescendant performers in the form of intellectual property and economic and cultural capital. Nevertheless, music could not brake the glass ceiling, as Afrodescendant artists mainly remained within racist hierarchies that rarely granted them the same kind of appreciation that was given to white artists. They had to function within widespread stereotypes of Afrodescendants, sometimes perpetuating them (Herzman 2013; Lane 2005; Siegel 2009).

14 Moore (1997:137) and Ned Sublette (2004:485) mention that Bola de Nieve was perceived by many as an Uncle Tom. According to Sublette, it was mainly Afro-Cubans of later generations who saw him in that way, similar to understandings of Louis Armstrong in the United States.

ings of the various strategies that Afrodescendant performers have devised to counter racism through art.

The first part of the article suggests ways in which Bola de Nieve used music to expand the roles and spaces of Afro-Cuban performance. With music, he could challenge the "sonic color line"—the cultural boundaries that were placed on the Afrodescendant body and the spatial limitations that were socially imposed on it. At a moment when white Latin American composers were appropriating Afro-Latin American sounds in unprecedented ways to construct their compositions, Ignacio Villa mobilized European elite culture, equalized *lo negro* and *lo blanco*, using these racial signifiers as raw material to parody. In doing so, he destabilized what Kristina Wirtz has called the "naturalization of blackness," meaning the making of atemporal and ahistorical ideas of Afro-Cubans that, based on notions of phenotype and genealogy, are culturally and racially deterministic (Wirtz 2014:4–5).

The second part of the article studies the relationship between music and racial identification. As this Afro-Cuban musician endured intense processes of racial inscription, he mobilized his Cuban and his Afrodescendant identity to resist the racism that was often inflicted on his persona by the public, the media, and by some of the artists that he worked with. Ultimately, however, it appears that Bola de Nieve understood the limitations of racial and national identification to achieve his full humanity. He linked his personal identity to music, devising discursive strategies that described his art as a performative medium. He emphasized that he was "always acting: I never believe what I sing."[15] Daphne A. Brooks's concept of Afro-alienation is helpful to analyze Bola de Nieve's strategies of self-alienation through music. Afro-alienation explains the processes through which many Afrodescendant performers convert their alterity into cultural expressiveness. They channel different forms of alienation onto their performance to come up with innovative, stylized alternative forms of cultural expression (Brooks 2006:4). As such, Bola de Nieve rendered racial categories "strange." The separation that he established between himself and the characters that he performed allowed him to defamiliarize his self and body from pre-established perceptions of race. Above all, "I am the music, I am the song," as he often declared, reminding us that he was beyond society's effort to reduce him into confined social categories.

Even though Bola de Nieve's contributions rank highly in the pantheon of Cuba's and Latin America's greatest artists, the scholarly attention that he

15 See Bola de Nieve's interview with Garcia de Dueñas (1969:58).

has received is not commensurable with his social and cultural relevance.[16] This is not surprising; until very recently, the contributions of Afrodescendant Latin American artists to their societies have been generally understudied (de la Fuente 2018; Moore 2018). Only a few scholars have analyzed Bola de Nieve's music, implicating him in divergent interpretations of race and nation. Some scholars have understood his syncretic repertoire as a symbol of Cuba's allegedly harmonious racial makeup. Their analyses have largely ignored the racial tensions embedded in Cuba's processes of mestizaje.[17] Other scholars, such as Glenn Jacobs, underline Cuba's racist culture and focus only on Bola de Nieve's Afro-canciones, highlighting his Afrodescendant roots instead of his "*cubanía*."[18] This approach has prompted passionate responses such as that by Cristobal Díaz, who accused Jacobs of wanting "Bola [only] thinking in black, composing in black, and performing in black," ignoring other important aspects of his work (Díaz, Jacobs & Gemeil 1989:190). However, framing Bola de Nieve's music into any category is much more difficult, as Alejandra Vázquez has suggested. She explains that with his performances, Bola de Nieve conveys a "precise but open task" of interpreting music in his own way, a "refusal of grand claims." He engages the audience, the instrument, and his repertoire carefully and tenderly. He integrates different publics that are both local and universal thanks to media technology. He knows that interpretations are fluid and

16 There are some biographical works written about Bola de Nieve in Spanish by Cuban scholars (Depestre 1990; Fajardo Estrada 2011; Ojeda 1998). Among the English-language scholarship, less than a handful of articles are focused solely on him (Díaz, Jacobs & Gemeil 1989; Jacobs 1988, 1991). He also appears in a few books and articles on Cuban music and the Afrocubanista movement (Gutiérrez 2013; Moore 1997; Sublette 2004; Vázquez 2013).

17 Leonardo Depestre argues that Bola de Nieve's works and social life are proof of an "acendrada cubanía" (pure cubanía) (Depestre 1990:10). Miguelito Ojeda started his compilation volume with a biographraphical note writen by Raúl Martínez (1998:7), who argued that Bola de Nieve "es una de las figuras de mayor significación en la historia de nuestra música, gracias a su rigor artístico y auténtica cubanía." (Bola de Nieve is one of the most significant figures in the history of our music, due to his artistic rigor and authentic cubanía.) Fajardo Estrada explains that Bola de Nieve's artistry was "un símbolo de irrepetible criollismo" (a symbol of unique criollism) (Fajardo Estrada 2011:16).

18 For instance, Jacobs's articles study his performances of the "Afro-songs" *Babalú*, by Margarita Lecuona, and Bola de Nieve's own *Ca'lota ya 'ta morí*. Both Jacobs and Moore focus on the Afro-song *Messié Julián*. Jacobs (1988:18) analyzes Bola's "stage personality as a reflection of the racism and stereotyping black performers had to contend with in pre-Revolutionary Cuba." Messié Julián revealed "the many-sidedness of self and society as blacks attempted to both participate in and protect themselves from the slings and arrows of racism and discrimination." Moore (1997:138) uses *Messié Julián* to explain Bola de Nieve's performance of the *negro catedrático*.

that "there is something greater than his performance in the here and now" (Vázquez 2013:6, 7, 26). Building on Vázquez's insightful interpretations, this article maps some of the ways in which Bola de Nieve engaged with music and race, reshaping the meanings of Afro-Cuban performance "in his own way," with his unique performing style.

1 Bola de Nieve's "Cuban" Repertoire: Living, Performing, and Constituting Race and Nation

Bola de Nieve created a performing style and repertoire that challenged the social expectations placed on Afro-Cuban musicians of the time. His performances defied "body-culture determinism," that is, the assumption that particular racialized bodies inevitably perform particular types of music.[19] His repertoire of Afro-canciones, as many expected, was central to his career, bringing him widespread artistic recognition. The first song he performed as a soloist in 1931 in Mexico was an Afro-canción, *Bito Manué, tu no sabe inglé*. His first well-known composition from 1932 was an Afro-lullaby, *Drume mobila* (Fajardo Estrada 2011:53, 38). As Moore explained, Bola de Nieve "stands out as the only dark-skinned Afro-Cuban to achieve recognition as a performer of Afrocubanista salon repertoire, and the only one to compose a number of such works himself" (Moore 1997:137). However, that is not all that he sang. Bola de Nieve also performed a body of European-related songs, which critics of the time called "the white section" of his performing sets (Fajardo Estrada 2011:68). Some of these he composed himself, such as *Tú me has de querer*, and *Ay amor*, while also popularizing songs written by white composers, such as Adolfo Guzmán's *No puedo ser feliz*.[20] His favorite pieces were in fact not the Afro-canciones, but three slow romantic songs: *Si me pudieras querer, No dejes que te olvide*, and *Señor por qué* (Castellanos 1992:7; Fajardo Estrada 2011:42). These songs shared similar characteristics: they were lyrical, intimate, and slow, and spoke of romantic love. They contrasted sharply with the Afro-canciones, which were usually of faster tempo, emphasized rhythm, and referred to elements of everyday Afro-Cuban working-class life. The lyrics of the Afro-canciones were usually written in bozal Spanish.[21]

19 Based on the idea that culture is essentially an outcome of race (Roberts 2016:7).

20 Ojeda 1998:47–59. Other examples are Marta Valdés's *Tu no sospechas*, the Expositos Brothers' *Vete de mí*, and Manuel Merodio's *Te olvidaré*.

21 This was the type of Spanish spoken by newly arrived slaves transported from Africa to Cuba, usually constructed using incorrect grammar and vocabulary.

Building an expansive repertoire that was composed not only by Afro-canciones but also by European music enabled Bola de Nieve to transgress into domains mainly reserved for white performers. At that time, Afro-Cuban musicians and dancers were expected to interpret specific genres of dance music, such as *rumbas* and *guarachas*, usually as part of exotic-looking and oversexualized acts. As Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman explain, African and African-descendant music have often been assumed to be intrinsically tied to dancing, imagined as emphatically rhythmical, and thus physical and of the body (Radano & Bohlman 2000:7). These preconceptions confined Afro-Cuban performers such as Celia Cruz who, even though she had a predilection for the amorous *bolero*, had to sing dancing-cabaret repertoire. Cruz remembered how Isolina Carrillo, another known Afro-Cuban performer of radio *Cadena Azul*, advised her in the early years of her career: "Girl, you are colored and we don't have much chance in the field of romantic music. You have to sing Afros and Guarachas. Then she arranged for me *Que vengan los rumberos* [Let the rumberos come] by Eliseo Grenet, and other similar songs" (Celia Cruz cited in Taillacq 2003:4cc).

Within such an environment, restricted by strong notions of body-culture determinism, Bola de Nieve's musical acts were rare in escaping established expectations of Afro-Cuban performers. He performed songs about the human condition such as intimate love, fidelity, sincerity, pain, and altruism—themes often absent in Afro-Cuban performances of the time. Described as a "diseur" (reciter), his unique voice blended narrating and singing, resulting in a sound that both enchanted and mystified. The magic of the voice he fashioned reconciled conflicting sentiments or characters, making them sound congruous in his songs. He modulated seamlessly from assertive to supplicating, from declamatory to whispering. He could evoke simultaneously a sense of distance and warmth; he could appear playful while profound, tender while crisp, suspensive while revealing. The contrast that emerged gave his performance an intensely humane and affective energy.

Bola de Nieve also broke with recurrent figurations of Afro-Cubans, which usually caricatured Afrodescendants as "primitive" and "wild" through performance. These representations had a long history of impersonating Afro-Cubans with "bulging eyes, fixed stares, grimaces and inarticulate cries, fierce displays with machetes, speech keyed as 'African'" (Wirtz 2014:7). Yet, instead of producing inarticulate cries, Bola de Nieve spoke and sang with a soft, clear quality that often gave his voice a calming, peaceful appeal. Instead of grimaces, he usually projected a gentle, yet illuminating smile; instead of making the contorted movements associated with folkloric performance, he sat at the piano, with his upper-body fully straight and his head upright, as if proud and secure

of himself. His movements exuded a sense of control, as if thoughtfully regulated. There were no bulging eyes in his performances; he often looked across the room intently, connecting with the audience and creating a sense of intimate complicity. At other times, he would look up, starry-eyed, as if full of hope.

Representative of Bola de Nieve's performances was his first concert as a soloist, which took place in June 1935 at the Liceo Artístico y Literario de Matanzas (Artistic and Literary Lyceum of Matanzas), a prestigious elite cultural center in the Cuban western province of Matanzas.[22] His performances were usually organized in two parts: The first part consisted of boleros, canciones, the musicalization of poems, ballads, elegies, couplets, et cetera. Additionally, he also included versions of French, Italian, and U.S. songs such as *La vie en rose*.[23] At the Liceo's June concert, the first part, referred to as "the white section," was mainly formed by musicalized "romances," which are a genre of Iberian poetry, in addition to his own lyrical compositions (such as *Señor por qué*), and "caricatures" of white famous artists such as Berta Singerman (Fajardo Estrada 2011:68). The second part of the concert, called "vanguardist compositions" in reference to the Afrocubanista *vanguardia*, was comprised of Afro-Cuban-influenced pieces such as Guillén's musicalized poems, *pregones*, *guaguancos*, *mayombes*, et cetera, including his well-known *Tú no sabe inglé*.[24]

---

22 Matanzas is one of Cuba's provinces located in the western part of the island. It is a city and province with a very large Afrodescendant population and with long-thriving Afro-Cuban religious and cultural practices.

23 Other examples of sets with similar formats are: Recital de Canciones, Aula Magna, April 7, 1967; Recital de Canciones, December 16, 1966, at the Cuban National Library; Recital, Centro Cultural Coyoaca Mexico D.F., July 18, 1967; Panamerican Union, Bola de Nieve, Cuban Popular Singer, Hall of the Americas, May 29, 1956. Documents found at the Archive of the Museo National de la Música, File 855, Bola de Nieve.

24 Concert program included in Fajardo Estrada 2011:67–69. The program was published in *Anales del Grupo Índice*, May 1935–36.

Concert Program

Part 1

1. **Romántico**
2. **Africanías** (a manera de mosaico cubano)
3. **Cuatro pequeños romances** (con música de Ignacio Villa)
   a) Por qué dejaste que te quisiera
   b) Niña de la enagua Blanca (texto: Gutierrez Nájera)
   c) Si no tengo a quien querer
   d) Probrecitos mis recuerdos
4.—**Un pequeño haz musical**
   a) No dejes que te olvide
   b) Señor por qué
   c) No quiero que me odies

The making of the Liceo concert reveals the central role that music played in shaping processes of racial formation within Cuba's ambiguous racial dynamics. Bola de Nieve's performance was one of the first cultural events sponsored by Grupo Índice (Indice Group), a cultural association formed by Cuban lawyer Américo Alvarado in the mid-1930s. Its purpose was to "facilitate the resurgence of cultural activity in the city with the organization of art exhibits, conferences, [and] music recitals, which both rich and poor, negros and blancos could attend."[25] The performance of an Afro-Cuban artist at an elite institution did not take place without sparking controversy and putting racist and antiracist interests in confrontation, however. Music functioned as a site of racial conflict: Mario Argenter (professor, cellist, and orchestral director in Matanzas) remembers the clash between the Grupo Índice's effort to make art inclusive and give space to an Afro-Cuban artist, and the resistance of the leadership of the Liceo to rent their hall to present an Afro-Cuban performer:

> Unexpectedly, right there, the principal of that institution advised him [Alvarado] that persons of the raza negra [black race] were not allowed to enter an exclusive high-society establishment. But as he [Alvarado] has always been a man willing to risk anything in order to realize his objectives, he responded: "You should have told me before, because we also have associates negros and the guest artist is also negro. We will then be forced to let everybody know that the performance is cancelled because of this reason." It seems that the principal spoke right away with the board of the Liceo, maybe its members understood that they were seeking enmities among the population with those actions, and finally they allowed entrance to people of color.[26]

5.—**Caricaturas**
a) José González Marín
b) Berta Singerman
Part II
1. **Composiciones de vanguardia**
2. **Música descriptiva**
a) Carlota ta' morí
b) Drumi Mobila
Motivos de son (versos de Nicolas Guillén, música de Emilio Grenet)
a) Búcate plata
b) Me vendo caro
c) Tú no sabe ingle

25 Testimony of Américo Alvarado, recorded by Fajardo Estrada in 1999 (Fajardo Estrada 2011:65–67).

26 Testimony of Mario Argenter, recorded by Fajardo Estrada in 1999 (Fajardo Estrada 2011: 71).

On the one hand, the Liceo exemplified Cuba's informal impulse toward racial segregation: up to 1959, many recreational and entertainment spaces were racially exclusive.[27] Bola de Nieve often played in venues that denied entry to Afrodescendants (Jacobs 1991:81). With regards to the concert at the Liceo, it is apparent that the director only allowed an Afro-Cuban musician to perform because of a fear of triggering public criticism and of being accused of racism: only after Alvarado threatened to go public about the Liceo's refusal to let Bola de Nieve play, did the Liceo's director consent to his performance. On the other hand, the retraction by the Liceo's director, ultimately allowing Bola de Nieve to play, reveals the ambiguous power of Cuba's discourse on racial fraternity to occasionally limit racist action. Grupo Índice illustrates the continuous efforts of many Cubans, including white Cubans, to live in a racially egalitarian society.

Another platform where Bola de Nieve could cross the "sonic color line" was his participation in Cuban television programs during the 1950s. This new medium was used by Cuban cultural policy makers from the Comisión Ética Radial (Commission on Radio Ethics, CRE) and the Ministerio de Comunicación (Ministry of Communication) to present mainly elite, European-influenced and Catholic programming, aiming to portray Cuba as civilized and modern. To "battle" against "indecency and immorality," the Comisión Revisora de los Programas Novelizados Radiales y Televisados (Review Commision on Radio and Television Novelized Programing) and the CRE rallied against Afro-Cuban dance performances and rhythms. As Yeidy Rivero and Alejandra Bronfman have explained, the Afro-Cuban working-class rumba was not considered appropriate for the public (Rivero 2015:79–92; Bronfman 2022). The CRE also ruled in 1954 that TV should not broadcast content "of cults or beliefs contrary to civilization, good customs, or social order, even if these expressions have a folkloric character." This ruling decreased "the numbers of televised performances associated with Afro-Cuban religious and cultural traditions" (Rivero 2015:85–86). Bola de Nieve traversed this racist environment since the beginning of TV broadcasting, defying established forms of sonoracial exclusion. He was a regular guest in Gaspar Pumarejo's Unión Radio y Televisión Canal 4, and in Goer Mestre's CMQ Television Canal 6. Aware of his position as an Afro-Cuban performer who was perceived by many in the audience as "negro," "ugly," and "fat," he expressed his dislike for the medium: "Vision is more important than sound on TV. That is why I think TV is for people who look beautiful, young, and non-

27 This was true particularly in luxurious cultural and recreational spaces; see de la Fuente 2001, "Introduction."

chalant; once the artist appears on screen, nothing can be done. That's why I don't prefer it [TV], I don't like it."[28]

Bola de Nieve was well aware of the expectations of his audiences. He explains how in his debut "people were hoping to see an Afro-Cuban rumbero and they saw me appear dressed in elegant suit."[29] If other Afro-Cuban performers had to dress in feathers and fruit, wearing exotic colors and exhibiting their corporeal nakedness in a primitivist display, Bola de Nieve "dressed like an English lord," as he used to say.[30] His close friend Salvador Corratgé remembers that "Bola de Nieve underlined the importance of socially projecting one's self that way [through dress code]. 'Your business card is in your tie, in the shininess of your shoes, of your clothes, and of your smile.'" The importance was not where you got the clothes nor how much they cost, but in "how you carried them, because [the meaning of] clothing, like words, is in how one uses them."[31] Therefore, on the one hand, the artist had to follow white elite notions of respectability, abiding to standards of what constituted elegant dress and mannerism. Only in that way could he access middle-class and elite spaces to perform his art and make a living. One the other hand, he mobilized symbols of hegemonic society to infuse his performance with legitimacy, which enabled him to contest the cultural legibility of racial representation.[32]

If Bola de Nieve's inclusion of "white" elegant dress code and musical repertoire was challenging, his caricatures of white celebrities added a new layer of subversion to his performances. Such parodies were a consistent feature of Bola de Nieve's repertoire, as observed in Grupo Índice's program. His 1937 performances at the Music Theater in Lima; his 1938 concert at the Cuban National Theater, where he shared the stage with some of the most famous Cuban musicians of the time, such as Rita Montaner and Esther Borja; and his performances in Santiago de Chile are just some examples. On these occasions, the press commended the "artista negro" for "enchanting the audience" as a "skilled parodist," receiving "lively applause" for his caricatures of white celebrities such as Margarita Xirgu, Berta Singerman, and José González Marín. His

28 Interview with Bola de Nieve, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:167.

29 Interview with Bola de Nieve, in García de Dueñas 1969:57.

30 Interview with Bola de Nieve, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:151.

31 Testimony of Salvador Corratgé, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:176.

32 Bola de Nieve was not unique as an Afrodescendant using sartorial elegance to gain social acceptance and respect. Across the hemisphere—from Argentina to the US—people of African descent mobilized dressing as a way to rehabilitate mainstream representations of the Afrodescendant body and gain social and cultural capital; see Alberto 2022; Walker 2017; Young 2010.

"successful" imitations and humor were particularly striking "because of their originality."[33] José Gómez Sicre, who introduced the program for the Liceo concert in Matanzas, wrote about Bola de Nieve's "famous" caricatures: "What he calls caricatures, we must note are not mere imitations. We are uniquely talking about the jocose accentuation, or exaggeration of the characteristics that have made certain celebrities famous" (Sicre quoted in Fajardo Estrada 2011:69). Unfortunately, there is little information about the ways in which Bola de Nieve performed his caricatures. Without sources such as videos or recordings of his impersonations of white celebrities, it is difficult to analyze them in more detail.

Nevertheless, that Bola de Nieve could poke fun at the expense of prominent contemporary white artistic figures in major concert halls across Latin America is provocative, to say the least. Indeed, these celebrities embodied the most desired images of what was to be emulated socially; they were paradigms of the social aspirations of the time. They were symbols of hegemonic white society. What do we make of an Afro-Cuban performer who not only got away with, but was also celebrated for, caricaturing the cultural capital embodied in these artistic figures, which included conceptions of beauty, fashion, and mannerism that were tied to white elite culture?

I argue that Bola de Nieve's inclusion of "white" canciones and caricatures of famous white celebrities point to a subversive process of inverse sonic borrowing. If the white Afrocubanista composers of the time were appropriating Afro-Cuban culture for their artistic inspirations, Bola de Nieve was mobilizing white elite cultural forms and deploying them for his own ends to construct his apparently innocuous performances: he dressed "like an English lord" not only to gain respect and to defamiliarize racist boundaries but to caricature. In doing so, his performances disrupted paradigms of beauty, refinement, and grandeur associated with white hegemonic culture. Moreover, by playing Afro-canciones that satirized elements of Afro-Cuban life, and by featuring performance elements that parodied whites, he equalized them both, mobilizing them as signifiers available for manipulation, exploitation, and play.

33 Period articles cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:69, 94, 95, 97. José González Marín (1889–1956) was a Spanish actor and reciter; Berta Singerman (1901–98) was a white Argentinian singer, reciter, and actor; and Margarida Xirgu (1888–1969) was a Spanish theater actress who had exiled herself in Los Angeles to escape Franco's dictatorship.

2 Bola de Nieve's Strategies of Identity-Making through Music

Bola de Nieve was embraced by Cuban intellectuals and artists who understood his music as constitutive of the island's racial diversity. He embraced both European and African heritages, performing them masterfully and making them "Cuban" in his own unique way. His music was thought of as " 'more' than black, 'more' than white," to borrow from historian Jill Lane, helping Cubans to imagine a "cartographic fantasy … that teaches its subjects how to desire their own national belonging" (Lane 2005:235). As Guillén explained, Bola was "ours": the *Afroespañol*, the Cuban, the *criollo*.[34] Time and again intellecuals celebrated Bola de Nieve's art because of its diversity and inclusiveness: "One of his most notable features" was that the could "tell Cuba's música negra" while interpreting international European repertoire artfully and "with the greatest rigor," argued performer Luis Carbonel.[35] "Our great artist … is a genuine product of Cuba's culture, a mix of Spain, of the European factors and those of America. That is why Bola de Nieve is both ours and universal," echoed reputed art critic Jose Manuel Valdés Rodríguez.[36] Bola de Nieve "was a synthesis of cubanidad. He was black like a telephone, as he used to say, but he could sing the oldest Castilian or Portuguese songs," reiterated Reinaldo González, as did many more.[37] These intellectuals shared the notion that what made Bola de Nieve remarkable was his capacity to amalgamate Cuba's racial roots, his embodiment of an inclusive nation. Together, the Spanish- and the Afro-Cuban work fantastically, constituting what is imagined as Cuban.

Yet Bola de Nieve's performances not only offer a window into the ways in which music can be mobilized for nation-making projects of mestizaje; they also illuminate the forms of oppositionality and resistance, and the mechanisms of survival and sustenance, that Afro-Cuban artists could develop through Afrocubanista-influenced art. Within Afrocubanismo and after this movement, Bola de Nieve actively constructed his performance as a symbol of racial transcendence and an emblem of cubanidad. He disseminated the notion that there was no Afro-Cuban identity, just a Cuban one, and he created a racially inclusive repertoire. For instance, in an interview for the newspaper *El Mundo* on the inauguration of the Primer Festival Internacional de la Cancion Popular (First International Popular Song Festival), Bola explained: "I have come as an 'exemplification'—and I emphasize that I do not mean as an exam-

34 Nicolás Guillén, cited in Ojeda 1998:24–26.
35 Interview with Luis Carbonel, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:162.
36 Interview with Valdés Rodríguez, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:212–13.
37 Interview with Reinaldo González, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:275–76.

ple, but as what is typical-specific of something—in this case of the pure Cuban element [de la cosa cubana pura]."[38] In his opinion, "There is no such thing as 'black Cuba', for which the accommodative term Afro-Cuban has been created. What is Cuban, which is born with its own personality, should be called mulato, because this island is made of negros and blancos. That is the beauty of our country: Half of the blood in every corner."[39] In another interview Bola de Nieve expressed that "the term Afro-Cuban is not exact. Why afro? Cuban and that's it. Cuban, born of the mixture of blancos and negros to achieve *mulato* … with a true antecedent of Spanishness. Don't you see me? Ignacio Villa Fernández is my name. Judge the Spanishness of the name."[40]

However, his support of a supposedly racially harmonious mestizo cubanidad was historically conjunctural and must be understood situationally as he navigated different identifications of race and nation as an Afro-Cuban musician.[41] Precisely because of his unique condition as one of the only Afro-Cuban musicians performing the salon repertoire, Bola de Nieve experienced racial inscription intensely. He was regularly classified not just as a Cuban musician but also as an Afrodescendant performer. Many newspaper articles politely announced him as an Afrodescendant artist: "Ignacio Villa, colored artist who undoubtedly will succeed";[42] "Bola de Nieve, the successful músico negro";[43] "a pianist and singer negro who is terribly popular";[44] "the success of Bola de Nieve, the músico negro."[45] The examples are countless, sometimes coming from key figures of Iberian intellectual life: For Rafael Alberti, Bola de Nieve was "a García Lorca negro"; for Antonio Quevedo, he was a "black Snow Ball [playing with the meaning of his name in Spanish] … this human Bola, refined and gentle like an elegant Congo prince."

However, while racial identification by different audiences ambiguously celebrated how popular the "músico negro" could be despite his African ancestry, at other times the commentary could be quite violent. During the beginning of his career, when Bola was playing the piano for silent movies in Guanabacoa's

38 This festival took place from December 1–16, 1967. Bola de Nieve interview, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:290.

39 "Luz sobre mambo," *Bohemia* (La Habana), November 12, 1950, pp. 62 and 106. Primary source cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:298.

40 *Bohemia*, March 7, 1948, p. 45. Primary source cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:152.

41 Other scholars have pointed out a similar dynamic in the politics of identification in other case studies; see Herzog 2003; Rappapport 2014; Wade 2000.

42 *El Mundo*, June 29, 1936. Primary source cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:83.

43 A Santiago de Chile's newspaper cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:93.

44 *Bohemia*, August 7, 1949, p. 45. Primary source cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:153.

45 Primary sources cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:94. For more examples, pp. 210 and 215.

theaters, the audience sometimes shouted offensive racist slurs at him. In Mexico, Rita Montaner spoke of him pejoratively in the newspaper *La Prensa*: "you don't know how sluggish this negro is! He has much disposition, but how sluggish … I sweat to make him work."[46] Here Montaner mobilized the narratives of colonial slave owners who recurrently complained about the alleged laziness of the enslaved to justify their use of disciplinary violence. Middle-class audiences sometimes commented about Bola de Nieve that "it was nice to hear him play piano, but not to hear him sing nor to see him … This black monkey … why doesn't he play the piano and shut up."[47] Others called Bola de Nieve "black like a telephone [negro color teléfono, in reference to the black color of many house phones at the time]." To that he responded in challenge: "Black are the telephones, you speak with them for five cents, and I charge much more to speak with me … Besides, I am like coffee, I am brown, like the tunic of the Virgin del Carmen. I even have sacred things in my color!"[48]

As Bola de Nieve dealt with racial identification, he defied racial inscription and racism, disturbing cultural perceptions of racial identity in different ways. As the quote above suggests, one such way was linking his performances and his own self to national ideologies such as mestizaje: "Cuban and that's it"; his "carmelita" color, like Mama Ines's coffee, protected by sacred Catholic virgins blessing his mulato condition. He deployed his Cuban identity to grant legitimacy to his art. For instance, when an interviewer asked if he felt embarrassed to play in front of famous pianist Arturo Rubinstein, Bola de Nieve replied: "No way, my dear [Que va mihijito]! He [Rubinstein] might play Chopin very well, but I sing really well *El Manisero* in La Habana, which is where this song was invented."[49] Like other Afro-Cuban intellectuals, Bola de Nieve understood the power of the ideology of mestizaje to gain social and cultural standing within Cuba's unequal society.[50]

Concurrently, Bola de Nieve resisted racism by upholding at specific moments an Afrodescendant identity built on an ancestral connection to Africa.

46 Rita Montaner, cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:50.

47 Interview with César López, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:234.

48 1958 Bola de Nieve interview with Radio Panamericana de Lima, cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:2169.

49 Interview with Bola de Nieve, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:199.

50 Bola de Nieve was not unique in mobilizing ideologies of mestizaje and racial fraternity to gain cultural and social capital. Other Afro-Cuban intellectuals, such as percussionist Blanco Suazo, used the arts to make claims about racial justice, arguing that their contributions to the nation's culture had earned them a place within Cuban society. They celebrated *lo negro* as part of Cuba's mestizaje, seeking authority in Afro-Cuban cultural forms. See García Yero 2022.

When in 1958 he was asked which musical group he felt connected to, he bluntly replied: "To my continent: Africa … I am faithful to what is mine [Yo soy fiel a lo mío]." Not only did he assert his loyalty to his Afrodescendant roots, but he also celebrated Africa's centrality to the development of music worldwide: "The rhythm was not invented—Africa had it before anyone could even think of singing," he would say.[51] He connected his Afrodescendant identity to the struggles of the African diaspora, explaining that "my symbol is the three Ns [mi símbolo son las tres *enes*] … Three Ns that very few people understand: *negro*, *nuevo*, and *necio* [black, new, and stubborn] … The three Ns that I carry as the initials of my soul."[52] In this way, Bola de Nieve affirmed his path-breaking life within Cuba's artistic racialized culture. He alluded to the originality of his performance style and his persistence to confront any challenge that stood in the way between himself, his music, and his life aspirations. He also produced restorative representations of the Afrodescendant self: Others might call him racial slurs, to which he responded that he was Bola de Nieve, "a black in flower [un negro en flor]," [53] linking his African descent to beauty and love.

Bola de Nieve's private life was also intimately connected to his African roots through religious practice. He got initiated into *santería* ["se hizo santo"] in 1963 by Guanabacoa santero Arcadio Calvo, who "consecrated him within the Afro-Cuban religion as Changó" (Fajardo Estrada 2011:253).[54] He was extremely private about this part of his life, however. His friend Martha Solís describes how their friendship became much closer after she discovered his religiosity by accident. Bola told her on that occasion that "now I belong to you, because you know me like very few do … you know my intimate life."[55] His secrecy about his religious practices should not surprise. Afro-Cuban religions had been historically stigmatized as uncivilized and thus marginalized by the state and by hegemonic society. He might have thought that public knowledge of his religiosity could damage the image of respectability that he had aimed to build

51 1958 interview with Bola de Nieve, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:201.

52 Bola de Nieve's interview granted to *Carteles*, January 27, 1957, "Las tres *enes* de Bola de Nieve."

53 Bola de Nieve, cited in Ojeda 1998:38.

54 *Santería* is a syncretic religion that has developed in Cuba since colonial times, merging Yoruba religious beliefs from West Africa and Catholicism. It is a polytheistic creed that worships deities, called Orishas from Yoruba traditional divinity. As such, in some forms it represents the mestizaje ideal that Bola de Nieve sometimes mobilized. It is estimated that about 8 percent of Cubans (about 900,000 people) were initiated in *santería* at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For more, see Mestre 1997 and Wirtz 2007.

55 Martha D. Solis, "Bola era así," 1971, p. 2. Archivo del Museo de la Música, File 855, "Bola de Nieve".

throughout his career. Moreover, the new revolutionary regime that came to power in 1959 began a repressive campaign against all religious practices soon after its take-over. Therefore, the artist might have also feared that his career could have been jeopardized by his participation in the Yoruba tradition, as the government came to control most forms of media and performance spaces on the island.

Nevertheless, he used his knowledge of *santería* productively, writing the ballet *Amor del fuego y el viento* in the early 1950s and basing its script on Yoruba religious culture. He once told Alicia Alonso, perhaps Cuba's most famous ballet dancer: "Alicia, what I love the most is the ballet. However, can you imagine this ugly and fat black man standing on his toes, dancing a classic ballet?"[56] Using self-mockery, Bola de Nieve dared to visualize himself as a dancer, even if at that time Cuban ballet was characterized by racial exclusion and made largely for white dancers; where Afro-Cuban dances were included, even these were performed by white bodies (Schwall 2021:37). Yet if he could only dream of dancing a classical ballet, he had the power to compose one. And thus defying society's restriction on what his race and physical body could do, Bola de Nieve wrote his Yoruba ballet in three acts: I) Orum y fiesta en casa de Obatala; II) Romances; and III) Kabgwo-Kabiencila. After he had finished writing it in 1953, he confided to Nicolás Guillén: "I have written it to please myself … To produce it the way I want to, one ought to spend thirty thousand pesos … I am going to print it in a luxury binder in a very exclusive edition of no more than ten copies."[57] He valorized his creation through humor and exaggeration: the more expensive and exclusive the production, the more precious it ought to be.

On the one hand, *Amor del fuego y el viento* is an example of a syncretic cultural production; it is, after all, a ballet. Bola de Nieve specified that the dancers needed to perform a "grandiose pas de deux" for the love scene between Changó and Oyá in Act II.[58] A palm tree (Cuba's national tree) was central to the scenography of this act. On the other hand, as this was a Cuban ballet, Bola de

56 Bola de Nieve, cited in Fajardo Estrada 2011:246.

57 Bola de Nieve, cited Fajardo Estrada 2011:247.

58 Bola de Nieve, ballet *Amor del fuego y el viento*, p. 6. Archivo del Museo de la Música, File 855, "Bola de Nieve." Changó is the Orisha of war, thunder, and fire. He represents male beauty and virility. His colors are red and white and he is syncretized with Santa Bárbara. Oyá is the Orisha of wind and storms, and of change. She is very close to Changó, her favorite companion. She guards the doors to the cemetery. She can wear any color except black. She is syncretized with the Virgin of the Candelaria and the Virgen del Carmen. Obatalá is the father of all the Orishas, and of everything on Earth. He is the owner of human thoughts and feelings. His representative color is white, and he is syncretized with the Virgen de las Mercedes.

Nieve grounded Cuba in African-descendant culture. The ballet was an assertion of the beauty and splendor of Yoruba traditions, countering widespread notions of African religions as uncivilized. His descriptions of the relationships between the Orishas highlighted human emotions related to motherhood, romantic love, anger, disillusion, jealousy, and deceit. He created a scenography that exuded wealth and splendour: The Orishas were royalty; they dressed in rich clothing; Obatalá lived in magnificent palace and gave gifts of gold.[59]

Asserting authority over Afro-Cuban culture, Bola de Nieve described his ballet as an "authentic" work based on the faithful representation of Yoruba traditions. He wrote an introductory note that stated:

> The dances in this ballet must conserve all their primitive and symbolic flavor. They should pay attention to the aesthetic bases of the Lucumí dances still practiced in Cuba, and to the "Bata" drums. Therefore, the choreographer should be advised by a knowledgeable religious practitioner. All the clothing, hairstyles, weapons, and general decoration must be inspired by the forms, rites, and colors of the Lucumí/Yoruba tribes.

He demanded that the set design had no Western influences. For instance, the gates of the cemetery in Act II should look "like a prehistoric dolmen, with no resemblance to any Christian features."[60] Circumscribing Afrodescendant artistic expression to Afro-Cubans, he required the ballet to be guided by a "religious practitioner" of the Yoruba religion, most of whom were Afro-Cubans.[61] He used notions of the "primitive," tapping into discourses of modernity that were constructed on the binaries of—and the distance between—primitivism and civilization.[62] Yet when Bola de Nieve invoked the "primitive," he moved it away from recurrent representations that painted it as savagery and barbarism. Instead, here the "primitive" was resignified as a powerful and productive force that carried purity, depth, and originality, and thus could counter the superficialities of Western civilization.

Therefore, Bola de Nieve moved deliberately between what could be understood as two contradictory positions: On the one hand, he supported the

59 Bola de Nieve, ballet *Amor del fuego y el viento*, p. 2. Archivo del Museo de la Música, File 855, "Bola de Nieve."

60 Bola de Nieve, ballet *Amor del fuego y el viento*, p. 6. Archivo del Museo de la Música, File 855, "Bola de Nieve."

61 Even though santería was not only practiced by Afro-Cubans, the majority of its practitioners and leaders were—and still are—of African descent (Bascom 1950; Wedel 2004).

62 For an insightful analysis of the construction of the primitive/modernism binary, see García 2017.

ambiguous national ideologies of mestizaje that advocated for the problematic transcendence of race into the national. Claiming the Cuban, he carved a space within the national community, inserting himself within the national discourses on racial equality that had been enshrined in the 1940 constitution. As a Cuban, he could access institutional spaces that advanced his career; and he could also play with, recreate, and make Hispanic culture his own. On the other hand, he continued to assert his Afrodescendant consciousness resiliently, valorizing his African heritage and mobilizing it to bring legitimacy to his performances. Challenging racism, Bola de Nieve emphasized diversity, complicating the very ideal of a homogenous mestizo Cuba that he often endorsed. He claimed both a Cuban and an African-descended identity, as they both enabled him to resist racism in particular ways, and as such he constructed his own individuality situationally.

Ultimately, it seems that Bola de Nieve understood the limitations of defining one's self around social constructions of race and nation. Even though the artist espoused his Afrodescendant and his Cuban identities situationally, he conjunctionally aimed to move beyond these paradigms, creating another layer of self-making that put music at the center of his identity. He devised discursive strategies that described his art as a performative medium based on constant practice and human perseverance. His performances were "rehearsed" acts; time and again he explained that "he prepared himself like an actor. Improvisation did not exist for him, he studied and matured each day."[63] He used to say "I am neither minstrel nor *decimista*,[64] nor a genius: I don't believe in improvisation: I have to study, rehearse. Mine is an art of expression more than impression. You have to see the character from the inside."[65] This is unusual for an Afrodescendant musician, considering that improvisation was—and continues to be—key to Afro-diasporic music. What is more, he made sure that the musical community knew that he was "neither minstrel nor *decimista*." Important Cuban art personalities often commented on his strict rehearsing practices: Composer Harold Gramatges cited him as an example of "discipline, of studiousness,"[66] while Luis Carbonell remembered him for his sense of rigorousness: "He rehearsed his pieces very much … notwithstanding his purpose of giving the impression that everything in him emerged spontaneously. In reality, he studied exhaustively his gestures, the details of each composition."[67] His

63 Bola de Nieve, cited in Ojeda1998:13.

64 Those who sing or recite *décimas* (ten-line stanza).

65 Bola de Nieve's interview with Garcia de Dueñas, in Garcia de Dueñas 1969:58.

66 Harold Gramatges's interview with Fajardo Estrada, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:145.

67 Luis Carbonell's interview with Fajardo Estrada, in Fajardo Estrada 2011:147.

biographer Ramón Fajardo Estrada detailed how "he put emphasis on studying the piano every day, on the cleanness of the musical performance, on rejecting improvisation, and on the rigorous learning of each piece" (Fajardo Estrada 2011:46). In Bola de Nieve's own words: "You need plenty of dedication, discipline one's own sentiment to frame a song. I have always 'performed' a song: I have never believed what I sing."[68]

Bola de Nieve's explicit disclosure of self-alienation through music and his rejection of personal identification with the characters that he performed enabled him to defy racist inscription. As such, Bola de Nieve's acts could be read as rehearsed ways to render race "strange." By performing both "white" and "Afro" repertoire, by satirizing both African- and European-descendant characters and then distancing himself rhetorically from their racialized construction, he could render them both foreign. His declarations that he did not believe in what he sang, that he was always acting, could be interpreted as attempts to defamiliarize his own body and self from the racial meanings that were inscribed in his performances. He placed himself beyond the characters that he embodied, transforming alienation into self-affirmation through art: "I am the music, I am the song"—he often declared. "Music and I are just one. Music is the only thing I love."[69]

It is as if music provided that space where Bola de Nieve could imagine himself above discrimination and national boundaries. His repertoire included songs from composers who were overtly racist (such as Eduardo Sánchez de Fuentes, who fervently denied the African component in Cuban music; see Cushman 2005), to the musicalized poems of antiracism activist Nicolás Guillén. He adored opera, he loved classical ballet. For Bola de Nieve, what was most important was the music—if he loved the music, he sang it, no matter which nation it came from, no matter who had written it. On this account, perhaps the greatest contribution of Bola de Nieve's life and performance was his reminder of the power of music to realize our shared humanity; that we, as human beings, are more than socially constructed subjects limited by categories of race and nation.

68 Bola de Nieve's interview with Garcia de Dueñas, in García de Dueñas 1969:58.

69 Bola de Nieve, cited in Ojeda 1998:37.

References

Alberto, Paulina, 2022. *Black Legend: "El Negro" Raúl Grigera and Racial Storytelling in Modern Argentina*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bascom, W., 1950. The Focus of Cuban Santería. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 6(1):64–68.

Benson, Devyn, 2016. *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Birkenmaier, Anke, 2016. *The Specter of Races: Latin American Anthropology and Literature between the Wars*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Bronfman, Alejandra, 2004. *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902–1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Bronfman, Alejandra, 2022. Radio, Decolonization and Decoloniality in the Caribbean. *In* Jason Loviglio & Mia Lindgren (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Radio and Podcast Studies*. Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, pp. 308–17.

Brooks, Daphne A., 2006. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Carpentier, Alejo, 1972 [1946]. *La música en Cuba*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Castellanos, Orlando, 1992. *Entrevista con Bola de Nieve*. La Habana: Ediciones Unión.

Chasteen, John, 2004. *National Rhythms, African Roots*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Cushman, Gregory T., 2005. ¿De qué color es el oro? Race, Environment, and the History of Cuban National Music, 1898–1958. *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 26(2):164–94.

De la Fuente, Alejandro, 2001. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

De la Fuente, Alejandro, 2018. The Art of Afro-Latin America. *In* Alejandro de la Fuente & George Reid Andrews (eds.), *Afro-Latin America: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 348–405.

Depestre, Leonardo, 1990. *Cuatro músicos de una Villa*. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas.

Díaz, Cristobal, Glenn Jacobs & José A. Gemeil, 1989. Responses: Correspondence on 'Cuba's Bola de Nieve' … (LAMR, Vol. 9 No. 1 (1988), 18–49). *Latin American Music Review*, 10(1):188–97.

Domínguez, Jorge, 1978. *Cuba: Order and Revolution*. Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Duno Gottberg, Luis, 2003. *Solventando las diferencias*. Madrid: Iberoamericana.

Fajardo Estrada, Ramón, 2011. *Deja que te cuente del Bola*. Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente.

Fraunhar, Alison, 2018. *Mulata Nation: Visualizing Race and Gender in Cuba*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

García, David, 2017. *Listening for Africa: Freedom, Modernity, and the Logic of Black Music's African Origins*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

García de Dueñas, Jesús, 1969. Bola de Nieve: Un "diseur" de raices afro-cubanas. *Triunfo Digital* 23(350):57. http://www.triunfodigital.com/mostradorn.php?a%F10=XXIII&num=350&imagen=57&fecha=1969-02-15 (accessed September 3, 2020).

García Yero, Cary Aileen, 2022. To Whom It Belongs: The Aftermaths of Afrocubanismo and the Power over Lo Negro in Cuban Arts, 1938–1958. *Latin American Research Review* 57(1):1–18.

Gutiérrez, Mariela A., 2013. Afro-Cuban Lyrics and Thematics in the "Canción Cubana" as Musical Genre. *Hispanic Research Journal* 14(4):295–312.

Hagstrom Miller, Karl, 2010. *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Hanchard, Michael, 1994. *Orpheus and Power: The "Movimento Negro" of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil 1945–1988*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Herzman, Marc, 2013. *Making Samba: A New History of Race and Music in Brazil*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Herzog, Tamar, 2003. *Defining Nations: Immigrants and Citizens in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.

Jacobs, Glenn, 1988. Cuba's Bola de Nieve: A Creative Looking Glass for Culture and the Artistic Self. *Latin American Music Review* 9(1):18–49.

Jacobs, Glenn, 1991. Bola De Nieve: Afro-Cuban Musical Innovator. *Journal of Black Studies* 22(1):77–103.

Kutzinski, Vera, 1993. *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Lane, Jill, 2005. *Blackface Cuba, 1840–1895*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

MacGillivray, Gillian, 2009. *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class and State Formation*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Madrid, Alejandro & Robin Moore, 2013. *Danzón*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mestre, Jesús, 1997. *Santería: Mitos y creencias*, 2nd ed. La Habana: Ediciones Prensa Latina.

Miller, Marilyn Grace, 2004. *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Moore, Robin, 1997. *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920–1940*. Pittsburgh PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Moore, Robin, 2018. A Century and a Half of Scholarship on Afro-Latin American Music. *In* Alejandro de la Fuente & George Reid Andrews (eds.), *Afro-Latin America: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 406–37.

Ojeda, Miguel, 1998. *Bola de Nieve* (Letras cubanas). La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas.

Ortiz, Fernando, 1940. *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*. La Habana: J. Montero.

Radano, Ronald & Philip Bohlman (eds.), 2000. *Music and the Racial Imagination*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Rappapport, Joanne, 2014. *The Disappearing Mestizo: Configuring Difference in the Colonial New Kingdom of Granada*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Reid Andrews, George, 2004. *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rivero, Yeidy, 2015. *Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Commercial Television, 1950–1960*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Roberts, T. Carlis, 2016. *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schwall, Elizabeth, 2021. *Dancing with Revolution: Power, Politics, and Privilege in Cuba*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Siegel, Micol, 2009. *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Stoever-Ackerman, Jennifer Lynn, 2016. *The Sonic Color Line*. New York: NYU Press.

Sublette, Ned, 2004. *Cuba and its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo*. Chicago IL: Chicago Review Press.

Taillacq, Evelio, 2003. Celia, La embajadora inigualable. *El Nuevo Herald*, July 19, 4cc.

Vázquez, Alexandra, 2013. *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Wade, Peter, 2000. *Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Walker, Tamara, 2017. *Exquisite Slaves: Race, Clothing, and Status in Colonial Lima*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wedel, Johan, 2004. *Santería Healing: A Journey into the Afro-Cuban World of Divinities, Spirits, and Sorcery*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Wirtz, Kristina, 2007. How Diasporic Religious Communities Remember: Learning to Speak the "Tongue of the Oricha" in Santería. *American Ethnologist* 34(1):108–26.

Wirtz, Kristina, 2014. *Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History*. Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Young, Harvey, 2010. *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.