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Mambo: The Rhythm of Cuban-Americanness

In the great old "Land of the Free," acceptance is a terrible thing to come by. For the different ethnic and racial groups that for some reason or another have ended up in the great metropolis that is the United States, acceptance has surpassed being a goal to strive for and its refusal has become a reason for contempt. All ethnic and racial minorities have problematized their chance at acceptance by refusing to become another ingredient in the melting pot of cultures and races that characterizes U.S. society. Acculturation and assimilation are now perceived as submissive and, consequently, as a betrayal of one's cultural heritage. In the controversial process of acceptance, all minorities have come across specific obstacles that have hindered the process. One that affects all minorities is the homogenization implicit in general, all encompassing categories such as "Hispanics" (Latinos) and "Orientals," wherein specific ethnic backgrounds are not only overlooked but also very much discarded. Ilan Stavans in his article "Life in the Hyphen," notes that "attempts to portray Latinos as a homogenous minority and/or ethnic group are rather recent" (34). He attributes this separatism to the forces that have pulled unionists apart. Stavans goes on to quote *Memoirs* by Bernardo Vega, a Puerto Rican social activist in New York City, a book that describes the Hispanic condition in the 1940s:

When I came to [New York] in 1916 there was little interest in the Hispanic culture. For the average citizen, Spain was a country of bullfighters and flamenco dancers. As for Latin America, no one could care less. And Cuba and Puerto Rico were just two islands inhabited by savages whom the Americans had beneficially saved from the clutches of the Iberian lion. Once in while a Spanish theater company would make an appearance in New York. Their audiences never amounted to more than the small cluster of Spaniards and Latin Americans, along with some university

professors who had been crazy enough to learn Spanish. That was it!
(Quoted in Stavans, 34).

Of course, at that time the mass migration of Cubans and Puerto Ricans had not yet taken place. However, it should be noted that the dominant modes of representation of Latin Americans during the Good Neighbor Policy era in the 1930s were already undoubtedly homogenous. Carmen Miranda's character, for example, epitomizes how "Latin Americanness" was conceived of in that area as a romanticized tropicalism. Nevertheless, the homogeneity of this kind of representation is different from that of "Latinos." The former is a romanticized conception of Latin America construed by popular musicals -- wherein it remained for many the only contact with Latin America— while the latter's homogeneity arises after and from direct contact with Latin Americans who had migrated to the United States. Moreover, indifference towards differences among ethnic groups changes with the overwhelming exodus of Cubans and Puerto Ricans that occurred several years after these observations were made. Interestingly, although these migratory waves were not necessarily welcomed by North American society, I would argue that because of specific social, cultural and political forces too complex to outline here, it didn't take the new migrants long to spark what has been termed a "Latin craze." A number of scholars have discussed this phenomenon, among them Celeste Olalquiaga in *Megalopolis* (1992). Olalquiaga coined the term "latinization" which seems to appropriately conceptualize the means by which Latinos achieved acceptance at this historical moment:

Olalquiaga defines the "latinization of the United States" as "a process whereby U.S. culture and daily practices become increasingly permeated by elements of Latin American culture imported by Spanish-speaking immigrants from Central and South America as well as the Caribbean" (ibid.).

This phenomenon brings me to the topic of this paper. As Olalquiaga notes, certain aspects of Latin American culture have historically deeply influenced U.S. popular culture. For Cuban Americans, one of the pivotal and crucial moments in this process was the popularity of the *I Love Lucy* show, which starred the Cuban actor Desi Arnaz (Lucille Ball's real-life husband) as Ricky Ricardo, a struggling Cuban American musician. Considered by writers such as Gustavo Pérez Firmat to be the initial link to a long list of Cuban American influences upon U.S. popular culture, Desi Arnaz's character epitomized a specific definition of Cuban Americanness that revolved around his behavior, heavy accent, temper and, especially, musicality. It was not surprising that soon after the show went on the air in 1951, audiences became enthralled with his character's conga playing, proliferating the popularity of the musical genre. Such emphasis on the musical aspects of Cuban Americanness is exemplified in Pérez Firmat's work when he contends that the popularity of Cuban American performers such as Gloria Estefan, "gives an indication of the prominent role that Cuban Americans are playing in the increasing —and inexorable—latinization of the United States; by now, few Americans will deny that, sooner or later, for better or for worse, the rhythm is going to get them" (1). Initiated by Desi Arnaz and intensified by the popularity of the mambo, the following is a look at how the Cuban American experience is played out through the musical genre of the mambo.

Establishing a working definition of Cuban Americans is an essential first step. As Pérez Firmat notes, "it is one thing to be Cuban in America, and quite another to be Cuban American" (3). Pérez Firmat productively uses Rubén Rumbaut's notion of the "one-and-a-half" generation, which refers to Cubans who spent their childhood or

adolescence in Cuba but developed as adults in the United States: "born in Cuba, bred in the U.S.A." (Pérez Firmat, 4). The 1.5 generation is distinguished from the preceding and proceeding generations by the fact that they possess the nostalgic sentiments of life in Cuba – real and concrete memories -- while at the same time being able to relate to the United States enough to consider themselves "somewhat" American. Pérez Firmat's account of his personal experience with all three generations, his being the 1.5, is useful in understanding these generational differences:

Only those immigrants who arrived here between infancy and adulthood share both the atavism of their parents and the Americanness of their children. I see it in my own family. My parents, who are now in their early seventies, have no choice but to be Cuban. No matter how many years they have resided away from the island—and if they live long enough soon there will come a time when they will have lived longer in Miami than they did in Havana—they are as Cuban today as they were when they got off the ferry in October 1960. My children, who were born in this country of Cuban parents and in whom I have tried to inculcate some sort of *cubanía*, are American through and through. They can be "saved" from their Americanness no more than my parents can be "saved" from their Cubanness. Although technically they belong to the so-called ABC generation (American-Born Cubans), they are Cubans in name only, in last name. A better acronym would be the reverse: CBA (Cuban-Bred Americans). Like other second-generation immigrants, they maintain a connection to their parents' homeland, but it is a bond forged by my experiences rather than their own (5).

Pérez Firmat expands on the beneficial nature of this kind of indefinite and all-encompassing identity. Basically, the 1.5-generation can choose among cultural habits because they have the capacity to do so. Furthermore, they undergo a process of adaptation that can be divided into three phases: substitutive, destitution, and institutional. During the substitutive phase there is a certain denial at play, insofar as individuals attempt to maintain the same life-style they had in Cuba while actually being in the United States. Pérez Firmat notes that this stage is essentially doomed to failure,

because realization of the actual condition—that they are not in Cuba anymore—is implicit. He adds, "After some point—after months or years or maybe decades—the immigrant begins to find it impossible to sustain, even precariously, the fiction of rootedness. Unsettling events reimpose a sense of reality" (8). These "unsettling events" can be described as a sort of "in your face" realization that United States culture cannot, under any circumstance, reproduce the same experiences lived in Cuba. In the second destitutive stage, exiles feel displaced and disconnected from the reality they created. As time passes and the feelings of destitution begin to subside, exiles feel more at ease in the new location they call home. Thus, the acceptance of the situation is the main characteristic of the final institutive stage. Pérez Firmat concludes, "Although the sensation of rootlessness does not dissipate altogether, it acquires a name and an address" (11).

Encompassing aspects of Cuban Americanness such as literature, music and film reflect the development of these three stages. One interesting example is Oscar Hijuelos, an important literary figure among Cuban Americans. Although he was born in New York, he was raised in a Cuban family atmosphere and Cuban culture remains his narrative point of departure. However, he also argues that he does not really have a grasp on Cubanness: "He doesn't command the language and he doesn't know the territory" (Pérez Firmat, 136). Hijuelos writes from experience, thus, his novels take the point of view of American born children of Cuban parents. Although he struggles with mythic notions of life in the island, his work is nonetheless still heavily permeated by Cuban or Latin characteristics. Pérez Firmat contends that the prevalent exotic nature of his novel The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love made it appealing to American

audiences (137). "Cuba provides Hijuelos with a subject, but it is not constitutive of his writerly stance, of his choice of language, or of his audience" (ibid.). This is yet another reason why both the novel and consequently the film based on the novel, Mambo Kings, have enjoyed success in the U.S.

Hijuelo's novel is about two Cuban musician brothers, César and Néstor Castillo, who migrate to New York in the late forties after Néstor's life is threatened. The owner of the club where they played in Cuba was in love with Néstor's girlfriend, María, and had threatened to kill Néstor if he continued seeing María. Aware of this, she warns César and asks him to take Néstor to the United States to spare his life. Once there, they form an orchestra called the Mambo Kings and enjoy a short-lived period of fame, especially after they guest star on the I Love Lucy show as Ricky's Cuban cousins. These two brothers are very different. Néstor is madly obsessed with María, which makes him a rather melancholic and depressive character. César, on the other hand, is the complete opposite. As Pérez Firmat describes him, "César is impulsive rather than melancholy. He is a consummate ladies' man with slicked-back hair, a mellifluous voice, and an irrepressible libido" (146). In addition, he resembles his idol Desi Arnaz in his behavior and his musical abilities. The correlation between the personalities of the brothers and the music they play is also very interesting. Néstor seems to embody the bolero in its melancholy and romanticism. Furthermore, Néstor's claim to fame is the bolero "Beautiful María of My Soul," a composition that by the end of the novel/film he has rewritten twenty-two times. His obsession with this composition will not be put to rest until Néstor dies in a car accident. On the other hand, César breathes the mambo. His

impulsive nature is much like that of the genre, which I will discuss further on. Pérez

Firmat makes the same observation:

But words and music do go together, as the mambo and bolero serve as correlates for the two dominant but discordant emotions in the book [and film], lust and melancholy. The mambo is fast-paced, aggressive, lascivious; it is César's chant of conquest. By contrast, boleros are sad, even whining ballads whose speaker is typically passive and mournful. Like Néstor's "Beautiful María of My Soul," the bolero is a medium for bemoaning unhappiness in love, for questioning the injustice of fate. If the mambo is about conquest, the bolero is about loss. If the mambo is copulative, the bolero is disjunctive. The mambo grunts, the bolero moans (149-150).

However, there is an important difference between the novel and the film version.

In the novel, the story is told from the point of view of Eugenio's, Néstor's son.

Considering this, Hijuelos' perceptions as a Cuban born in America are reflected through Eugenio's same upbringing. In the film version, however, his character is eliminated. Thus, the viewer has to assume that the views presented are that of Cuban Americans, disregarding the author's efforts to emphasize his unavoidable distance from Cuban culture, which can result in stereotypes of the Cuban American. However, the film barely reflects the Cuban American experience. Pérez Firmat comments on the novel as a "Hispanic" book; not stressed enough, however, are the implications of this reception:

Although Mambo Kings has been termed "the best Hispanic book" ever published by a commercial press in the United States, its connection to things Hispanic is far from simple. From a literary point of view, even as Mambo Kings evokes some central works in the canon of contemporary Hispanic fiction, it takes distance from them. Even though it is tempting to read Mambo Kings as a "Hispanic book," the novel makes such reading virtually impossible. In rhetorical terms Mambo Kings may be regarded as a sustained traduction, that is, a treacherous, transfigured repetition of certain elements of the Spanish American musical and literary culture. Although the novel bears a certain Hispanic family likeness, it is far from being a chip off the old block (148).

What's more, although the three stages of adaptation are present in the film, more emphasis is given to the music. In fact, the story in the film completely revolves around – very enjoyable-- musical performances. As a final note, I also want to point out that perhaps because the film's director is not part of the 1.5 generation – or even Cuban -- the focus of the film was not the essence of Cuban Americanness, but, rather, those aspects of Spanish American culture that Pérez Firmat mentions.

The "Latin beat" has for many decades been popular in all corners of the world, and the United States has not been an exception. However, contrary to popular belief, the mambo is not traditionally Cuban, which further complicates the representation of the Castillo brothers in the film as the ethos of this particular kind of musicality. The film would have been more accurate if it had dwelled on the development of the brothers' musicality when they moved from Cuba into a "Hispanic" community in New York. As Pérez Firmat notes, "the mambo is no less American than Cuban, and it was never as popular in Cuba as it has been in the United States" (80). If anything, the mambo is less Cuban than anything else: "Conceived in Cuba, nurtured in Mexico, and brought to maturity in the United States, the mambo is a child of the Cuban monte that spent most of its time away from the island" (81). Hence, although the conga and the rumba are in fact Cuban imports, the mambo is not. This is certainly not the historical understanding produced by the film's presentation of the music, especially given the performances by Tito Puente and the character played by one of the best-known Cuban performers in the United States, Celia Cruz. Her impact upon the film was somewhat disturbing because of her influence in the music industry and the implications of her performance. For the viewer who recognizes who she is in real life, it becomes tedious to have to

disassociate her character from her real life persona. First of all, because her impact as a performer is transcendental, it can't be easily overlooked. Secondly, given that this is a film that concerns Cuban matters and features "real" life people as themselves—such as Tito Puente—it isn't easy to overlook the fact that Celia Cruz is not playing herself but a Santería-practicing mambo mother. If one considers Pérez Firmat's claim that one and a halfers can freely extract from either culture as they please, then such a representation would not be problematic. However, for viewers who demand more accuracy in representation, it would have been⁷ more productive to dwell upon and analyze this process of cultural extraction and hybridity rather than present it transparently as a given.

What makes the mambo so appealing, especially taking into account its chaotic nature? On the nature of the mambo Pérez Firmat writes:

There's always been a certain petulance to the mambo, a kind of music that doesn't know its place. the name connotes excess, outrageousness, lack of decorum. A mambo mouth is a loud mouth, someone with a loose tongue, someone who doesn't abide by rules of propriety. The mambo is nothing if not uncouth, improper, its musical improprieties sometimes even bordering on the improperio, the vulgar or offensive outburst (81).

In colonial discourse, the mambo encompasses the dialectic characteristics of a fetish or stereotype. As Homi Bhabha writes in his essay "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," colonial discourses tend to encompass contradictory aspects which contribute to the inherent ambivalence of stereotypes:

The fetish or stereotype gives access to an "identity" which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it. This conflict of pleasure/unpleasure,

mastery/defence, knowledge/ disavowal of it, absence/presence, has a fundamental significance for colonial discourse (75).

Thus, the mambo's acceptance—much like that of Carmen Miranda's fruity hats and persona, is not merely due to its attractiveness but also its repulsiveness. Such dialectic is also discernible in the mambo's inherent sexuality, which was rendered both primitive and barbaric:

The reputation as an uninhibited, libidinal dance increased interest in the mambo. A recurring theme in the press coverage is the mambo's "primitive" or "barbaric" dimension, what one writer called its "high sex quotient" and another termed its lid's off demonic quality" (93).

Encompassing all the aspects of Cuban Americanness, the mambo faced problems of adaptation as well. Given that the mambo barely had any lyrics, "the mambo's laicism only aided its international diffusion" (Pérez Firmat 88). Pérez Firmat points out the importance of recognizing the difference between the mambo and "latunes" of the 1940s. As it turns out, the other songs that were popularized at the time used rumba rhythms and English lyrics, while the mambo remained in a hybrid state and did not consciously choose either language. Yet then genre was americanized. Dámaso Pérez Prado —considered to be the actual mambo king—shortened his name to just Prez Prado. And the music itself underwent a subtle transformation as if to justify its unexplainable attraction. Pérez Firmat notes, "The Americanization of the mambo, the translation of "Pérez" into "Prez," offers a striking demonstration of the United States' own romance with otherness, a romance characterized by equal doses of fascination and fear" (92). Such process seems to be very compromising and it is not surprising that the author strongly supports taking into account the fact that his argument calls for a congruence between both Cuban and American heritages without

privileging one over the other. Does this appropriately characterize Cuban Americanness?

Pérez Firmat makes two conclusive statements about the correlation between the mambo and Cuban Americanness. The first one has to do with the topic of Americanization/assimilation discussed above, wherein he contends:

I realize there are many "ethnics" in this country who wail and worry about the danger of assimilation, of losing their roots. But Cuban culture, like the mambo itself, has little to do with roots. We Cubans have a strange relationship with our roots: we eat them. We don't worship them. We don't enshrine them. We consume them. The mambo is not a root, it's an anchor. It places, but it does not ground (81).

In her study of the exiled position of many Cuban Americans, Ana López comments on the nature of Cuban Americans of the 1.5 generation in cinema, which she contends is not easily identifiable. She adds:

Although their individual trajectories as filmmakers are quite varied, their partial assimilation has meant that they have often felt free to leave behind the explicit denunciations of the first generation in order to focus more and more on the nature of life as exiles; in other words, to wrest exilic nostalgia away from the tragic discourse of dispossession and to recuperate it as ethnic identity—Cuban-American, but also Latino (47).

Thus, from both statements one can conclude that the nature of Cuban Americans precisely embodies Pérez Firmat's correlation with the phrase "we are here now" and strives on the acceptance of the unavoidable changes that Cuban identity must undergo in order to survive in the United States. Finally, in the same fashion that mambo mania has subsided with time, so has the Cuban Americanness slowly dissipated, as the 1.5 generation grows older and makes room for the second (in actuality third) generation to flourish culturally. Pérez Firmat concludes, "The mambo is the one-and-a-half's dream music; it celebrates fractions and sings of parts that refuse the whole" (102).

Consequently, the chaotic nature of the mambo is much like that of Cuban-Americanness in that they both create a contradictory space. Sylvia Spitta brilliantly adds, "The doubleness of the Cuban-American is lived both as nostalgia for wholeness, closure, singularity and the celebration of doubleness, multiplicity, and homelessness" (173). If anything, this is this healthiest response to the Cuban-American situation in that culture is neither exemplified nor disregarded entirely.

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