

1 “I Was Born of Africa”: Black Consciousness and *Cubanidad*

IN 1960 ARSENIO recorded “Yo nací del África” (I Was Born of Africa) for his LP *Cumbanchando con Arsenio (Fiesta en Harlem)* (SMC-1074). The lyrics of this song express the core of Arsenio’s racial identity. In the verse section he rejects his Spanish surnames while speculating as to what his true African name and ethnicity might be. He then resolves his uncertainty in the *montuno* (call-and-response) section by embracing his African and Congolese heritage: “Yo no soy Rodríguez / yo no soy Travieso . . . tal vez soy Lumumba / tal vez soy Kasavubu / yo nací del África / ¡sí! ¡África! . . . yo soy el congo / tú eres mi tierra / mi tierra linda” (I’m not a Rodríguez / I’m not a Travieso . . . maybe I’m a Lumumba / maybe I’m a Kasavubu / I was born of Africa / yes! Africa! . . . I am the Congo / you are my homeland / my beautiful homeland). But Arsenio does more than merely claim Africa and the Congo as his homeland.

In fact, he reclaims the tropes of Africa and the Congo, which historically stood for cultural and racial inferiority and backwardness, and redeploys them as viable and enviable entities of identity. He expresses this sentiment by signifying on the Republic of the Congo’s independence in 1960 from Belgian colonial rule when he lists Kasavubu and Lumumba—Joseph Kasavubu was the first president (1960–65) of the Republic of the Congo, and Patrice Lumumba was its first prime minister (1960–61)—as his possible “real” names. He also signifies on the trope of Africa in the title “Yo nací del África” (I Was Born of Africa), in which he affirms his African identity as having been “born” from the legacy of colonialism, slavery, and the ideology of white racial supremacy.

Throughout his career, Arsenio expressed in his lyrics a transnational or Afro diasporic perspective on issues of race and black identity. He contested the racist significations of Africa and blackness and decried the persistence of racism throughout the Americas and Africa. He also expressed his *cubanidad* (Cuban identity) as well as his aspirations for peace and national reconciliation for Cuba. In effect, Arsenio affirmed his African heritage and Cuban identity as coexistent yet distinct rather than as a *mestizaje* or synthesis as, for example, his compatriot and Cuban national poet Nicolás Guillén expressed in many of his poems. In “El apellido” (My Last Name), for example, Guillén also reflected on Cuba’s

ancestral ties to Africa, but in the end he affirmed his own racially mixed background and desired a Cuban national identity that was also “mulata” or racially mixed (Benítez-Rojo 1996, pp. 126–30; White 1993, pp. 60–62).¹

This chapter situates Arsenio’s racial and national identities within the contexts of the *afrocubanismo* cultural movement of the 1930s, the Cuban revolution of the 1950s, and both the civil rights movement in the United States and African independence from colonial rule in the late 1950s and 1960s. By celebrating his African heritage and Cuban nationality while condemning racism in Cuba and throughout the Americas, Arsenio directly challenged Cuba’s and in general Latin America’s ideological contradiction, which historically has posited both the democratic principle of racial equality and the superiority of racial and cultural “whiteness” (see Helg 1995, pp. 6–7). In addition he rejected the dominant Western value system, which through centuries of slavery and colonialism defined African and African-derived cultural traditions of the Americas as backward, immoral, comical, and repulsive. It is through the veracity of Arsenio’s Afrocentric and patriotic songs that we can appreciate what lay at the core of his sense of self.

FORMATIVE YEARS

Dorotea Rodríguez Scull (d. October 29, 1956) had fifteen children, fourteen boys and one girl.² Raúl Travieso, Arsenio’s youngest brother, could only remember the names of six siblings. Of these six the first three, Julio (b. 1902), Aurelio (b. 1906), and Ignacio Arsenio (b. 1911), were born in the small rural town of Güira de Macuriges in the municipality of Bolondrón in the interior of the province of Matanzas.³ Arsenio’s father, Bonifacio Travieso (d. 1933), worked in the fields of Bolondrón as a farm worker. (Sometime in the 1930s Arsenio adopted Rodríguez, his mother’s maiden name, as his stage name to avoid the awkward name Travieso, which in Spanish means “mischiefous” or “naughty.”) By the time Arsenio was four years old (1915), the family had moved to the large agricultural and sugar municipality of Güines, in the south coast of the province of La Habana.⁴ They rented a small two-bedroom house in the barrio of Leguina where Arsenio’s last three siblings were born: Estela (b. 1915), Israel “Kiki” (b. 1917), and Raúl (b. 1920). In addition to Bonifacio, there were other family members who worked in Güines’s agricultural and sugar industries. For example, Dorotea’s brother Yingo worked as a truck driver for a North American exporter, transporting produce from Güines to the docks of Havana and Matanzas, where it was later shipped to the United States. Arsenio’s older brother Aurelio worked in the Centro Amistad, a large sugar plantation.

Several years after moving to Güines, Arsenio suffered a tragic accident that eventually left him totally blind. The accident occurred when the youngster mischievously poked a mule on the backside with a stick, causing the animal to deliver a violent kick to the boy's head. It is unclear exactly how old Arsenio was when the accident occurred. His daughter Regla believes that he was around seven or eight years old (c. 1918), whereas his brother Raúl remembers that he was around twelve years old (c. 1923). It is certain, however, that Arsenio was old enough to remember having sight. Just as tragic were the inadequate medical resources in Güines, which otherwise might have saved his left eye, which was removed, and his sight in his right eye.⁵ As a result of this tragedy, he and younger brother Kiki initiated an extraordinarily close bond that would last for the rest of Arsenio's life. In his pain and fear, Arsenio turned to the music that penetrated his darkened world. And the traditions that formed his musical upbringing were those most associated with African-derived rural musical culture in central western Cuba.

Rural Beginnings

Slavery in Cuba officially ended in 1880, a mere thirty-one years before Arsenio's birth.⁶ There were two periods in the decades leading to the abolition of slavery that saw the introduction of an extraordinary number of African slaves. Forty-seven percent of the total number of slaves who were brought to the island during the entire nineteenth century was introduced between 1821 and 1840. Another large number of slaves were introduced between 1851 and 1860, 73 percent of whom were concentrated in the interior of Matanzas and La Habana. Güines and Matanzas were two of the nine provinces with the largest slave populations, the majority of which were rural slaves.⁷ It has been estimated that in the nineteenth century the ethnic composition of Africans in this part of Cuba was predominately Congo (35 percent), followed by Lucumí or Yoruba (23 percent), Gangá (13 percent), Carabalí (9 percent), and Macuá (4 percent) (Guanche 1996, pp. 61–62).⁸

These figures support Arsenio's many assertions that his African ethnicity was Congo.⁹ As he stated in 1964, "My family [and] I come from the Congo. So as a child I knew many things that my grandfather taught me and many other things that I no longer practice" (Rodríguez interview 1964). In Güines, Dorotea's father, who died before Arsenio had his accident, most likely taught him the beliefs of Palo Monte, a religious system that was introduced by the Congo in Cuba.¹⁰ He must have learned Palo Monte from his father as well, who was also a practitioner.¹¹ Arsenio was also immersed in Congo-derived secular traditions such as *yuka* and *rumba*. On days off, his uncle Yingo borrowed his North American

boss's truck to take Arsenio and Kiki on regular trips throughout the interior of Matanzas to participate in rumbas. These were festive and often spontaneous reunions that took place in homes, cafés, street corners, and parks and featured couple and solo dancing accompanied by drummers and vocalists. The young boys learned how to play *tumbadoras* or conga drums in Matanzas from legendary *rumberos* such as Malanga, Mulence, Roncona, Cesario, Tanganica, and Andres Baró,¹² as well as in Leguina, Güines, which was also known for its famous *rumberos* (Orovio 1985, p. 15). They also learned the similar but older drumming tradition known as *yuka*, which was especially associated with the rural interior areas of Matanzas (León 1984, p. 71).

In Leguina the young Arsenio absorbed other African-derived sacred and secular traditions. A neighbor of theirs who was a *santero*, a practitioner of the Yoruba-based Santería religion, hosted an annual celebration for Changó (or Santa Barbara) on the fourth day of every December. These celebrations, which would sometimes last for more than two days, were attended by people from near and far. Finally, Arsenio engrossed himself in *son* music by learning to play the *marímbula* (a large box resonator with tuned metal tongues that are plucked), the *botija* (an earthenware vessel whose side hole was blown into and whose top hole was covered and uncovered by the hand), and the *tres* (a traditional Cuban guitar with three double-coursed strings). The marímbula and botija were used to provide bass accompaniment by early rural and urban *son* groups.¹³ Arsenio learned to play on a marímbula that older brother Julio made out of a wooden guayaba crate. He learned to play the botija at rural festivals known as *guateques*. Finally, he first learned to play the *tres* from Victor González, a well-known *tres* player in Güines. But he was forced to continue on his own after González became too ill to continue giving the young boy lessons.

Urban Migration

In the early morning hours of October 20, 1926, the western half of Cuba was struck by a powerful and deadly hurricane. It began its path of destruction over the southern island of Isla de Pinos (renamed Isla de la Juventud in 1978), crossing into the southern part of the province of La Habana, directly over Güines. Three days after the hurricane hit, news from Güines reported that in the city industrial and public buildings were completely destroyed or suffered considerable damage. The situation in rural Güines was even more distressing, as the following reporter described: “What is certain is that Güines . . . bears a new and rough blow. It remains in misery, and hundreds of its inhabitants will go hungry. . . . Today, many *giinero* families find themselves without a livelihood”

(*Diario de la marina*, October 23, 1926). Among these families whose homes were destroyed and whose circumstances were uncertain were the Traviesos. Luckily, Arsenio, Kiki, and their uncle Yingo were on one of their trips to Matanzas when the hurricane hit. Several days later, they returned to rejoin the family. The Traviesos and many other homeless families were temporarily housed in schools and other public facilities that withstood the powerful hurricane. Soon after, Bonifacio and Dorotea decided to move the family to Marianao, near the capital of Havana. Marianao was also hit hard by the hurricane, the damages of which totaled about 4 million pesos. Los Hornos, Pogolotti, Los Angeles, Buena Vista, and other working-class sections of the city suffered the worst damages (Inclán Lavastida 1943, p. 149). Despite the destruction, however, the family's best opportunity for living a better life seemed to be in Marianao, which was the fastest-growing city in the province of La Habana. Older brother Julio had already been living and working in Marianao before the rest of the family arrived.

From 1926 through the 1930s Arsenio and his family lived in several working-class *repartos* (wards) in Marianao. The family first settled in Los Hornos, in the barrio of Quemados, where the fifteen-year-old Arsenio did not have to go far to meet famous black son musicians. For example, the family lived several blocks away from Felipe Neri Cabrera, the singer and maraca player with the popular black son group Sexteto Habanero. This son group had returned from New York City, where they made twelve recordings for RCA Victor in September 1926, about one month before the hurricane. Raúl remembers that he, Arsenio, and Kiki regularly observed Habanero's rehearsals from the window of Cabrera's home. In one occasion Kiki told the musicians that Arsenio played tres and wanted to learn more. The musicians obliged his request and invited Arsenio to play. After, Raúl remembers the following: "When we left, Arsenio told us, 'my brothers, I'm going to play better than [Carlos Godínez].' My other brother asked him, 'Why do you say that?' [Arsenio] 'You know why? Because he plays only two chords and more chords can be played on the tres. I'm going to play more than he does'" (Raúl Travieso interview June 19, 1996). Evidently, Arsenio's interest in breaking the mold took root early in his life.

Shortly after this time, the family moved north of Los Hornos to the reparto of La Serafina, which was also in the barrio of Quemados. It was here that Isaac Oviedo, tres player and director of Sexteto Matancero, heard people talk about a young, blind tres player who had recently arrived from Güines.¹⁴ Oviedo met Arsenio and subsequently gave him several lessons on the tres. Exactly what impact, if any, Oviedo had on Arsenio's style of playing tres is difficult to determine. It is safe to say, however, that Oviedo's predilection for both tres solos (his were the first

to be recorded) and unconventional chord progressions appealed to the young musician (see Ávalos 1991, p. 18, and 1995, pp. 21–22). Arsenio and his brothers would also walk to nearby Pogolotti, a reparto in the barrio of Redención, where another famous black son group, Septeto Boloña, frequently performed at the *sociedad* (social club) Club Casadores.

In all likelihood, Arsenio’s encounters with these black son musicians and their music had a profound impact on the teenager in terms of his musical interests and identity. In the first place, these musicians incorporated aspects of sacred and secular Afro-Cuban cultural traditions in many of their recordings of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Second, opportunities for economic and professional gain opened up to them as a result of their success as recording artists. For example, Septeto Habanero’s popularity grew as they became established performers in exclusive nightclubs and *encerronas* (or exclusive parties in private residences of wealthy white politicians and business leaders) (see Moore 1997, pp. 94–101). Hence, for Arsenio, playing and composing music was not simply one of the very few occupations available to a blind, black working-class individual. It was also a promising means by which he could achieve artistic and personal recognition. He undoubtedly was aware of the social challenges he faced. But as his musical accomplishments reflect, he was committed to overcoming what might have seemed to be insurmountable odds. By 1937, at the age of twenty-six, Arsenio Rodríguez would indeed become a commercially successful composer beginning with his *afrocubano* “Bruca maniguá.”

RECLAIMING “AFRICA”

In July 1969, Arsenio, along with his brother Kiki and Cuban bassist Luís Salomé, performed at the Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C. The program in which he was scheduled to perform was titled “Black Music through Languages of the New World.” (The circumstances of this event and Arsenio’s participation in it are discussed further later.) Arsenio began by introducing himself and his music:

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen... I am Arsenio Rodríguez, the composer of many songs, principally African, which you have heard. I composed all of those *afros* that you used to hear Miguelito Valdés sing, “Bruca maniguá,” “Fufuñando,” and “Adiós África,” which Xavier Cugat recorded, and many songs which are sung all over the world, all of which have an African influence from my heritage.¹⁵

Arsenio’s characterization of his music as African certainly resonated with the theme of the program and the broader political and social

environment of the 1960s, marked by the civil rights movement in the United States and the black power movements throughout the African diaspora.

Through the 1930s in Cuba, however, recognizing one's African heritage with pride and praising the African contribution to the nation were largely condemned as tantamount to harboring antiwhite racist and unpatriotic sentiments (Helg 1995, p. 7). In addition, many black Cuban intellectuals denigrated African-derived cultural traditions, such as the Afro-Cuban religions Santería and Palo Monte, as backward and antithetical to the ideals of mestizaje (cultural and racial miscegenation) and *superación* (racial uplift). As we will see, Arsenio reversed many of these myths' cultural signs in much of his music from the late 1930s through poetic techniques that in other Afrodiapsoric traditions have been characterized as signifyin(g).

Repetition with a Difference: The Afrocubanos, 1937–40

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social Darwinism and positivism provided the ideological framework in which Cuban intellectuals reflected on race and Afro-Cuban culture (Helg 1995, p. 16; Hagedorn 2001, pp. 177–78). For instance, in his earliest work Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz drew from the social Darwinian roots of his training in criminology in racializing the notion of crime, whereby he identified the “superstitions, organizations, languages, dances,” and, ultimately, the “African psyche” of black Cubans as the most grievous vices of Cuba’s races and of Cuban society in general (Hagedorn 2001, pp. 175–77). The cure, according to Ortiz, was to “civilize,” that is, “de-Africanize,” Cuba’s black population beginning with its expressive cultural traditions. Indeed, in the first two decades of Arsenio’s life, action was taken by the Cuban government to repress forms of African-derived Cuban traditional practices (see Moore 1997, pp. 229–32). Such measures often incited racial violence against black practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions (Helg 1995, pp. 238–9; Hagedorn 2001, p. 190).

Paradoxically, beginning in the 1920s, a group of Cuban artists, poets, and composers led a cultural movement known as *afrocubanismo* that supported modernist interpretations of Afro-Cuban folkloric traditions for the sake of defining a new Cuban national culture (see Moore 1997).¹⁶ As these artists increasingly drew from Afro-Cuban traditions for their modernist works, black intellectuals in particular became more critical of afrocubanismo artists, whom they saw as exploiting “decadent” cultural traditions and therefore contradicting and threatening the goals of mestizaje and *superación*. The fact that the exponents of afrocubanismo were primarily white middle-class intellectuals and artists probably stimulated

more resentment and suspicion on the part of their black critics. No other black writer was more emphatic in his or her rejection of Afro-Cuban traditions and the tenets of afrocubanismo than Alberto Arredondo, who in the pages of *Adelante (Onward)*, a black middle-class magazine, evoked the ideals of mestizaje and superación in his critiques: “It is logical that what began to be known as ‘Cuban music’ during the colonial era, was a mix of African and Spanish rhythms, although the marked improvement of the former continued to get stronger” (Arredondo 1938). By the 1930s Fernando Ortiz himself had also embraced the tenets of mestizaje when he defined Cuban culture as an *ajíaco* (stew) that had been produced by the “disintegration” of the *ajíaco*’s basic elements (Spanish and African) into a new “mestizaje de razas” and “mestizaje de culturas” (Hagedorn 2001, p. 192).¹⁷

Arsenio’s afros or *afrocubanos*, as he called them, seemingly evoke all the ambiguity, contradiction, and tension that defined the discourse on race and national identity in Cuba at this time. In 1937 Orquesta Casino de la Playa, an all-white Cuban jazz band, and its lead vocalist, Miguelito Valdés, a Cuban of mixed heritage, became the first group to record “Bruca maniguá” (Witch from the Bush), Arsenio’s first and most recognized international hit.¹⁸ The basic musical form of Arsenio’s afrocubanos consists of four sections: introduction, verse, bridge, and *montuno*. The introduction, verse, and bridge sections are marked by the *tango-congo* rhythmic pattern, whose song form of the same name became a conventional genre of the Cuban *zarzuela* (light opera) beginning in the early 1910s. The afrocubano’s concluding montuno section is marked by a basic son rhythmic structure.

The predominant characteristic of Arsenio’s afrocubano songs, however, is its textual portrayal of black slaves and nineteenth-century plantation life. Arsenio did this by setting the text in “Africanized” Spanish, commonly referred to as *bozal* speech, and by introducing conventional black character types of the Cuban popular theater. These familiar signs of black difference and inferiority became popular in the minstrel-like portrayals of blacks in nineteenth-century Cuban *búfos* or comic theater (see Moore 1997, pp. 42–52). A closer examination of his afrocubanos, however, reveals that in redeploying these dominant signs of blackness Arsenio engaged in a parody of a parody, a reversal of received racist conventions, or what Henry Louis Gates Jr. has referred to as “repetition with a difference” (Gates 1988, pp. 106–10).

Although its stylized form became especially common in Cuban popular theater in the nineteenth century, the Africanized Spanish that had been created by newly arrived African slaves remained prominent in the speech of practitioners of Palo Monte well into the twentieth century.¹⁹ As linguist John Lipski notes, the speech of *bozales* or African-born slaves formed as a

hybrid structure consisting of a Spanish (or pidgin Spanish) morpho-syntactic frame with an African lexical core. Hence, much of the vocabulary used by bozal speakers or Palo Monte practitioners consisted of “Congo” or Ki-Kongo lexical items (Lipski 1993, pp. 18–19, 103). In contrast, slave songs in bufo productions and zarzuelas, though superficially alluding to Afro-Cuban imagery, in all likelihood lacked African lexical items and, more significantly, proverbs actually used by practitioners of Palo Monte and other African-derived religious systems of Cuba.

Regardless, Afro-Cuban oral traditions and speech were unintelligible to most listeners of Cuban popular music, especially Casino de la Playa’s core audience, which consisted of tourists and the white Cuban elite in Havana. Arsenio’s afrocubanos, therefore, were received as consisting of familiar tropes of black difference, primitivism, and inferiority. Although Arsenio’s opening verses introduce the conventional black character type and imagery, a transformation in representation occurs in the bridge section, for example, of “Bruca maniguá” in which the slave condemns the *mundele* (Ki-Kongo for “white man”) or slave owner: “Mundele con bafioté / siempre tan garchá / etá po mucho que lo ndinga / siempre tá matratá / ya ne me cabá / bafioté fúirí” (The white man with his hostility / he’s always deceiving / he’s saying many things I don’t understand / he always mistreats me / he’s killed me / with his abuse).²⁰ In “Ven acá Tomá” (Come Down Tomás) the black protagonist aspires to one day own a small plot of land, warning the *mayoral* (slave overseer) of his impending escape: “Yo quiere que te acueda / lo que yo te tá decí / ma que yo me va de aquí ¡Mayorá!” (I want you to remember / what I’m going to say to you / look, I’m leaving this place, slave overseer!). In both excerpts, the black protagonists’ outspoken criticism of and confrontational stance toward their oppressors break with the conventional representation of particularly the comical “negro bozal” or pretentious “negro catedrático” character types of the Cuban popular theater. Additionally, by inserting Congo lexical items within a “Spanish syntactic frame,” the bozal speech in “Bruca maniguá” reflects a more accurate representation of nineteenth-century African speech in Cuba than its strictly parodied form in early twentieth-century zarzuelas.

Arsenio also uses proverbs associated with Palo Monte and other traditional passages with Congo lexical items. “Adiós África” (Goodbye Africa) contains several such passages, the first verse of which follows: “Ahora mimo yo tá llorá / po que me tá recordá / como nego me trae / de África” (Today I’m crying / because I am remembering / as a black man they took me / from Africa). Later in the montuno section, the protagonist, speaking the line “ya son las hora” (it is time), orders his “ganga” (the cauldron where the spirit that the *palero* “owns” resides) to resolve his problems.²¹ The line “quien rabo mono ‘mara mono” (he who ties the

monkey’s tail will be tied by the monkey) is a traditional Palo Monte proverb, which warns that any deception or ill will toward somebody on your part will have negative ramifications.²² The literal translation of the line “ahora sí que casilla ‘garra coronise” is “Now my bird trap works.” But in this context, *casilla* (pigeon-hole) represents the *ganga*” and *[a]garra coronise* (to grasp a Cornish hen) signifies the mystical power of the *ganga*. The word *kiyumba* refers to an animal or human skull, which was used for Palo Monte rituals, but is no longer practiced (Castellanos and Castellanos 1992, p. 391). Finally, *Kindimbyola*, which is spoken by Miguelito Valdés toward the end of the recording, was the name of a powerful *ganga*, which is well-known among paleros. There are subtle translations of other words that also refer to the *ganga*, such as *caravela* and *kimbisa* as heard in “Yo son Gangá” (I’m a Gangá).²³ Also, the spiritual sources residing in the *ganga* are often ridiculed by Palo Monte priests, as in the lines “¿Qué dinga bobo? ¿Qué kuendá?” (What are you saying, idiot? When is it going to grow?), to provoke the *ganga*’s mystical power.

Arsenio’s afrocubanos demonstrate not only the extent of his knowledge of Palo Monte spirituality but also his critique of the discourse on African inferiority and atavism as (1) manifested in racist representational tropes in Cuban popular culture and (2) implied in the ideology of mestizaje (read: racial and cultural “progress”).²⁴ The ideals of mestizaje, in particular, directly marginalized rural and urban lower- and working-class black Cubans, like Arsenio and his family, who were deeply rooted in African-derived cultural traditions of Cuba. As he countered in the afrocubanos, these traditions of his youth, though representing a “primitive” era for most of the white Cuban elite as well as black intellectuals, continued to be a vital and powerful aspect of his music and life. In another song from the late 1930s, a *conga* titled “Todos seguimos la conga” (We All Follow the Conga), Arsenio restated his critique, but this time explicitly:

Ya la conga está tocando / por el Prado va / con un baile vengo ‘rrollando / todos van de ‘tras / y despues muchos critican “Es un antigüedad” / cuando suena los tambores / con ese ritmo y como pasa / repiquetando su sonido / nacido de África / cuando suena los cencerros todos van a ‘rrollar.

(Now the conga is playing / down Prado [Street] it goes / while dancing I come rolling / as everyone follows behind / and later many people criticize “this is an ancient custom” [i.e., atavistic] / when the drums sound / with that rhythm and how it passes by / playing its sound / born in Africa / when the bells sound everyone goes rolling.)

The full effect of Arsenio’s strategic revision, however, was borne out in his utilization of the all-white Orquesta Casino de la Playa and in the

misreading of his afrocubanos by Casino de la Playa's audiences. As was the case in many elite cabarets in Havana, New York City, and elsewhere in the late 1930s, white musicians and performers presented stylized versions of Afro-Cuban carnival music, known as the conga, which included the use of the conga drum (known as *tumbadora* in Cuba), itself signifying racist stereotypes of African primitivism. Felipe García Villamil, a high-ranking practitioner of Palo Monte, Santería, and Abakuá explained that black Cubans (including himself) resented the often capricious appropriation of Afro-Cuban music by many white composers. He suggests that many even participated in sacred ceremonies to use musical elements in their popular and art compositions.

This would often upset us because of... racism and that whole mess. They wrote arrangements and the majority of those who sang them were white. Also, they gave the impression that they didn't understand what they were singing, which they sang anyway according to what they felt.... There were many white Cubans that were mixed up in the religion in order to use the music [for their orchestras]. (García Villamil interview, January 1998)

Although García Villamil did not specify, his criticism may readily be directed to the Cuban popular music industry as a whole as well as afrocubanismo art composer Amadeo Roldán, for example, who was known to frequent Santería and Abakuá ceremonies for musical inspiration (see Moore 1997, p. 203).

In contrast, Casino de la Playa's recordings and performances of Arsenio's afrocubanos represent a strategic reversal of the long history of white appropriation and exoticization of black culture. As he recounted in 1964, Arsenio actively instructed Casino de la Playa's vocalist Miguelito Valdés on how to sing the lyrics: “[Miguelito] hadn't sung afrocubanos. I had to teach him the words... [because] the lyric in ‘Bruca maniguá’ is African, from the Congo” (Rodríguez interview 1964). “Bruca maniguá” as well as “Fufuñando” and “Adios África” were eventually recorded by Xavier Cugat and other internationally famous figures, thereby introducing Arsenio and his music to unsuspecting international audiences. As the Palo Monte proverb “quien rabo mono ‘mara mono’” goes, Arsenio indulged these audiences with racist fantasies of black inferiority only to infuse the songs with African lexical items and rhetorical aspects of Afro-Cuban oral traditions, condemning slavery and its legacy of racial injustice.

“No Spanish! African! African!”

Throughout his career Arsenio continued to denounce racism and express his identification with the black diasporic experience. It is important to

note that in 1947 he had visited Tampa, Florida, lodging in the segregated section of the city, on his way to New York City (see chapter 3). Three years later, in Havana, Arsenio’s conjunto, with his sister Estela singing lead, recorded “Aquí como allá” (It’s the Same Here as It Is over There), in which he indirectly references his experience with racial bigotry in the American South. In the verse section Arsenio writes of the pain and inequality that blacks in the South as well as Africa, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, New York, Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela experience and sing about in song. In the montuno section he emphasizes the shared experience of pain and inequality sung by black people “here” and “there,” that is, of the African diaspora. Although he experienced the peculiarities of racial segregation in the South, Arsenio makes clear here the transnational history of slavery and experience of racism shared among black people of the Americas and Africa.

He also composed songs that directly addressed or signified on sociopolitical events specific to particular areas of the African diaspora. In “Yo nací del África” (I was Born of Africa), as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, he signified on the Republic of the Congo’s independence in 1960 from Belgian colonial rule by expressing his own rejection of (or independence from) the legacy of slavery and Spanish colonialism (in the form of Spanish surnames) in Cuba. He restated his African and Congo identity in “África canta y llora” (Africa Sings and Cries), which Miguelito Valdés recorded accompanied by Machito’s orchestra in 1963 (Tico 1098). Stylistically, “África canta y llora” is an afrocubano, marked by the tango-congo ostinato pattern that is heard throughout the recording. Instead of portraying the imagery of the Cuban colonial plantation and slavery, however, Arsenio discusses the end of European colonial rule in Africa. Most important, he again contests the racist image of the “happy African” playing the drum by praising Africans’ yearning for and achievement of political independence: “Decían que no sabía añorar / más que al tambor / ahora todos tendrán que apreciar / tu gran valor / . . . Ahora te toca reir / se terminó tu sufrir / y yo me siento feliz” (They said that you yearned / for nothing but the drum / now everyone will have to appreciate / your great value / . . . Now it’s your turn to laugh / your suffering has ended / and I feel happy).

While living in New York City in the early 1960s, Arsenio composed two songs in which he reflected on the continued injustices that blacks were suffering. In “La democracia” (Democracy) he asks, “Si ya las cosas han cambiado / y hay derechos de igualdad / ¿por qué yo soy discriminado? / si todo el mundo somos igual / ¿la democracia donde esta? / nos falta mucho pa’ llegar” (If things have changed / and there’s equal rights / then why am I discriminated against? / for everyone is equal / where’s the democracy? / we have a long way to go).²⁵ In “Vaya pa’l

monte” (Go to the Mountain), which his conjunto recorded in 1966 for his LP *Viva Arsenio!* (BLPS-216), Arsenio again articulates an African diasporic sensibility in pointing out that blacks whether in Carolina, Puerto Rico, or New York City continue to have to fight for better work and living conditions.

Clearly, Arsenio sensed the growing frustration in the poorly enforced or altogether ignored civil rights laws that were passed in the United States in 1957, 1960, and 1964 as well as the disproportionate amount of unemployed and poverty-stricken African Americans. Indeed, several months after Arsenio recorded “La democracia,” in summer 1964, riots erupted in African American neighborhoods in New York City, Jersey City, and Chicago. And on August 11, 1965, eight months before the recording of “Vaya pa’l monte,” riots erupted in the African American areas of south Los Angeles, including Watts. At this time Arsenio was living nearby, in Exposition, while performing every Saturday night at the Paramount Ballroom in East Los Angeles (see chapter 4). It is uncertain whether or how often he performed any of these songs live. What is clear, however, is that Arsenio shared a deep empathy for and expressed a broad identification with the African diasporic struggle against racial discrimination and colonialism.

In July 1969 Arsenio and Kiki traveled to Washington, DC, from Los Angeles to participate in the Smithsonian Institution’s third Festival of American Folklife. Arsenio was invited to participate by the festival director, Ralph Rinzler, who originally conceived of the festival and brought it into being in 1967 (see Abrahams 1995; Gagné 1996). Rinzler was described as having a “clear idea of how to bring great tradition-bearers together with the larger public audience by finding within their work the vitality of their cultural inheritance and the genius of the individual artist operating within that tradition” (Abrahams 1995, p. 325). Although he worked mostly with Anglo and African American musicians and craftsmen, his interest in tradition bearers did include those from other regions of the Americas. He first came into contact with Arsenio in May 1964, when he recorded Arsenio and Kiki performing Cuban and Afro-Cuban folkloric music. The session, which probably took place in Kiki’s apartment in the South Bronx, included performances of son, *bembé*, *yuka*, and other folkloric Afro-Cuban music, as well as “La democracia.”²⁶

Five years later, in 1969, Rinzler, now the director of the Festival of American Folklife, engaged Bernice Reagon, former member of the Freedom Singers, to organize a program of black music for the festival.²⁷ Reagon conceived of a program that would celebrate the shared aesthetics of black music as performed and sung by African Americans of the former English, French, and Spanish colonial regions of the Americas. She

titled the program "Black Music through Languages of the New World." Because of his work with Arsenio in 1964, Rinzler recommended Arsenio to Reagon as the strongest representation of black music of the "Spanish-speaking" New World. Altogether, Arsenio and Kiki, along with Cuban bassist and longtime friend Luís Salomé, performed three times during the festival. They performed music from the Palo Monte, Santería, and Abakuá repertoires as well as Cuban secular folk music. In addition, Reagon invited the Ardoin Family and Canray Fontenot, who were zydeco musicians from Lafayette, Louisiana, and several African American groups, including Ed, G.D., and Lonnie Young; fife and drum performers from Como, Mississippi; and the Moving Star Hall Singers.

Arsenio's second performance, which took place in the evening of July 5 at the main stage (see Figure 1.1), opened with an impromptu collaboration with Reagon singing the spiritual "One More Time," and Arsenio accompanying her on tres, making for a poignant Afro diasporic moment. Then, in introducing Arsenio, Kiki, and Salomé, Reagon shared the following thoughts with the audience: "It's very strange for me to be in the company this afternoon of about five or six black people, all of whom were from Cuba, all of whom could tell me about their different gods.



FIGURE 1.1. The Rodríguez Brothers, Festival of American Folklife, Washington D.C., July 5, 1969. *Left to right:* Arsenio Rodríguez, Kiki Rodríguez, and Luís Salomé.
Source: Photographer unknown; photograph courtesy of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution.

These are people who say, ‘I’m African, and I know it.’ The Rodriguez Brothers!”²⁸

Reagon’s impression of Arsenio had been shaped not only by Rinzler’s recommendation but most directly from a conversation she and Arsenio had through an interpreter. When she first met Arsenio at the festival, Reagon explained to him her concept of the program, telling him that his music was to represent black music sung in Spanish. According to Reagon, Arsenio ardently responded, “No! No! No Spanish! Lucumí! African! African!” (Reagon interview 2004). His clarification, as Reagon pointed out, instantly transformed her in terms of her own early career as a young scholar of black history and culture as well as her conception of the program: “It opened up in my mind what was American and also what we knew or thought we knew about what existed and what did not exist” (*ibid.*). In planning the program, Reagon had not considered including musical traditions sung in African-derived languages of the New World, such as Congo and Lucumí. Arsenio, however, instructed Reagon that these traditions still existed and, most important, they were living and not reified African traditions of a bygone era. As Reagon explained, “Arsenio Rodriguez was *very clear* that he was teaching me. And it was not long, it was not oppressive. It was just very clean and he did it in his textured voice that I really recognized because that’s the way my father preaches and that’s the way my father would talk” (*ibid.*).

Despite the ideological and political shifts Africa (the trope and continent) would undergo throughout the twentieth century, Arsenio always maintained his admiration for the cultural and historical values it imparted throughout the African diaspora. Indeed, throughout his career Arsenio drew from the African-derived musical and oral traditions of his youth not only for musical and lyrical material but for critical purposes. In the 1940s he composed son montunos, such as “No hay yaya sin guayacán,” “Dundunbanza,” and “Soy el terror,” whose lyrics also drew from the Cuban Congo and Palo Monte oral traditions (see chapter 2). In addition to his African heritage, Arsenio also reflected on his Cuban identity and expressed his patriotism in song. As Cuban Alfredito Valdés Jr. (who performed with Arsenio’s conjunto in the early 1960s) succinctly stated, “Arsenio, being a direct descendant of Africans, *siempre lo dijo en su música* [always said it in his *music*]. He always acknowledged that he was *cubano* and that he was *afrocubano*” (Alfredo Valdés interview 2001).

“ADORE HER AS MARTÍ DID”

In his patriotic songs, Arsenio expressed his concerns regarding contemporary political and social matters that affected *all* Cubans. From the time he began his professional career as a musician and composer in the

late 1920s to his final visit to Havana in 1957, Cuba underwent frequent periods of political instability and economic hardship. One of his earliest politically oriented songs was “Pobre mi Cuba” (My Poor Cuba), a *lamento guajiro* that was published in 1935 and first recorded that same year by Septeto Machín in New York City. Arsenio wrote this song during two difficult and overlapping periods in Cuba, the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado (1928–33) and the Depression. During the dictatorship, strikes, violent labor demonstrations, and acts of brutal government repression became common. Furthermore, with the onslaught of the Depression in October 1929, the Cuban economy entered into extreme crisis, resulting in unemployment for hundreds of thousands and desperate living conditions, especially for the country’s poor (Moore 1997, pp. 77–78).

Fittingly, in “Pobre mi Cuba,” Arsenio describes the hardship of the guajiro or rural peasant farmer, whose cacao, tobacco, and sugarcane crops are either worthless or ruined. It is important to note that this song was published and recorded after the fall of the Machado dictatorship, considering that the government was known to send into exile composers whose material was suspected of being subversive.²⁹ Arsenio’s conjunto recorded it more than a decade later in 1951 in Havana. Unfortunately, Cuba’s economic and political situation was once again unstable and primed for a dictatorship. In 1950 Arsenio’s conjunto recorded “El que no tiene no vale” (The One Who Has Nothing Is Worth Nothing), which was composed by Arsenio’s trumpet player, Félix Chappottín. The song’s verses describe the social stigma of not having money as the refrain answers with “¿Cuanto tienes? ¿Cuanto vales? / Nada tienes. Nada vales” (How much do you have? How much are you worth? You have nothing. You’re worth nothing). It concludes with the equally cynical advice: “Así es la vida / así es el mundo / no hay que pensarla / todo es mentira” (That’s life / that’s how the world is / don’t put too much thought into it / it’s all a lie).

In the mid-1950s, as Fidel Castro’s revolution against Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship intensified, Arsenio composed and recorded the bolero “Adórenla como Martí” (Adore Her as Martí Did), which is his most well-known patriotic song. In it, he appeals to all Cubans to resolve their differences in peace and love and to unite the country so that the sacrifices of the Cuban independence patriots would not have been in vain. As stated in the refrain, Arsenio implores his fellow Cubans to “Amenla como Bermúdez / cuídenla como Agramonte / defiendala como Banderas / y como Carlos Manuel / amenla como Aguilera / cuidenla como Moncada / defiendala como Maceo / adórenla como Martí” (Love her [Cuba] as Bermúdez did / care for her as Agramonte did / defend her as [Quintín] Banderas did / and as Carlos Manuel [de Céspedes] did too / love her as

Aguilera did / care for her as [Guillermón] Moncada did / defend her as [Antonio] Maceo did / adore her as [José] Martí did). It is important to note that Arsenio was fascinated by and had a deep knowledge of black *mambises* (Cuban independence fighters), especially black generals Quintín Banderas, Guillermón Moncada, and Antonio Maceo.³⁰ He premiered “Adórenla como Martí” in 1957 for the Club Cubano Inter-American, a social club of primarily Cubans and Puerto Ricans of color, in the South Bronx. Soon after, he recorded it with his conjunto for the LP *Sabroso y caliente con Arsenio Rodríguez y Su Conjunto* (Puchito 586) (see chapter 3).

He once again pleaded for peace in “Cuba llora” (Cuba Is Crying), which he composed in 1958 and recorded for his conjunto’s LP *Arsenio Rodríguez y Su Conjunto Vol. 2* (Ansonia 1418). The lyrics characterize the burning of sugarcane, tobacco, and coffee fields—a tactic that was carried out by Castro’s rebels in Oriente and the Sierra Maestra to destabilize Cuba’s economy and, hence, Batista’s power—as well as war in general as acts of “capricious vanity.” As evidenced in the words of these and other patriotic songs, Arsenio’s sole concern with respect to politics was for peace. He did not affiliate himself with any one political party or orientation, as was also evidenced in his refusal to join the Cuban Communist Party, which owned Havana’s Radio Mil Diez, in the mid-1940s. As his brother Raúl recounted, Arsenio’s conjunto was performing daily on Radio Mil Diez, the directors of which eventually approached Arsenio with respect to his political affiliation:

Arsenio told them, “No, no, no. I don’t belong to any party. I play for both the conservatives and the liberals. And if they’d pay me I’d play in a cemetery. My [politics] is music.” . . . Joaquín Ordoqui [Communist Party leader and representative from the province of Las Villas] asked him, “Arsenio, why don’t you play ball?” Arsenio answered, “I don’t believe you’ve ever heard of a blind ball player. Talk to the members of the conjunto, and whoever wants to join the party, fine. That’s their business. But me, Arsenio, no.” . . . And since Arsenio was very popular, and his conjunto was heard throughout Cuba, they let Arsenio work for the station without belonging to the party. (Raúl Travieso interview, August 3, 1998)

In his response (as recollected by Raúl) to their demands, Arsenio poignantly stated his contempt for political parties, even to the party that had given his conjunto access to its radio station and had fought for the protection against discrimination. On the other hand, he remained artistically and professionally dedicated to the working class of Havana (see chapter 2).

In two other songs, however, he did make unambiguous statements against the colonial and imperialist relationships that Puerto Rico and Cuba had with the United States. In the bolero “A Puerto Rico” (To

Puerto Rico) he expressed his empathy with the island's colonial status, blaming its unhappiness on "a foreign reason." He composed this song on returning to Havana from New York City in 1947 and recorded it in Havana in the following year. On March 12, 1949, three drunken American sailors urinated on the statue of the nation's father, José Martí, located in Havana's Parque Central. An angry crowd threatened to lynch them, but the Cuban police intervened and arrested the sailors. The next day, however, they were effectively released when they were turned over to officials of the U.S. Navy. Cubans were disgusted not only by the sailors' desecration of the statue but also by their government's submissive attitude toward the U.S. Navy and government (Phillips 1959, p. 251). Arsenio expressed his own condemnation of this incident in the bolero "Amor a mi patria" (Love for My Country), which the conjunto later recorded in Havana in 1951.³¹

Although Arsenio condemned violence in some of his patriotic songs, he was known on occasion to lash out against figures of authority when he felt that an injustice was being committed. For instance, in 1953 the internationally famous Cuban group Conjunto Casino performed its first show of a two-week stint at the Tropicana Club, which was located in the South Bronx. Frank Ugarte, a delegate of New York's Musician's Union Local 802, was also in attendance to enforce the union's strict regulations, allowing Conjunto Casino to perform only as a show attraction and not for dancing. The union also stipulated that if the club's management allowed the audience members to dance, they would be fined and Local 802 musicians would not be allowed to perform. Audience members, however, did dance, and after Conjunto Casino's set was finished Arsenio's musicians began to take the stage when Ugarte ordered all union members back off the stage. Arsenio told his musicians that whoever did not want to play did not have to. Then, he, his brothers Kiki and Raúl, and his vocalist Cándido Antomattei proceeded to take the stage. According to Raúl, Arsenio went to the microphone and addressed the audience, asking, "Why is this, for they [Conjunto Casino] are our fellow countrymen? Why shouldn't we play?" (Raúl Travieso interview, July 31, 1996). Babby Quintero, a columnist for the Spanish-language newspaper *La Prensa*, quoted Arsenio, saying that "He, as a Cuban, will play even if the union terminated his membership" (*La Prensa*, October 14, 1953). Arsenio and his other bandmates were eventually fined by the union.

Besides showing contempt for the union's stringent regulations, Arsenio expressed in no uncertain terms his solidarity with his fellow Cuban nationals, despite the fact that Conjunto Casino, an all-white group with the exception of percussionist Carlos "Patato" Valdés, performed almost exclusively for white social clubs in Havana throughout the 1940s. Hence, as can be readily seen in his patriotic songs as well as in his defense

of the musicians of Conjunto Casino, Arsenio was not antiwhite. He was, however, very critical of the legacy of colonialism and white racial supremacy as manifested in the degradation of African culture and the discrimination against black people throughout the African diaspora. This represents an opportunity to compare Arsenio's transnational sensibility of the black experience and his Cuban national identity with those espoused by other black thinkers from Cuba and the United States.

Like Arsenio, Nicolás Guillén, Gustavo Urrutia, and other black Cuban intellectuals were pro-Cuban and anti-imperialist. They also condemned racism as experienced among blacks everywhere (see White 1993; Schwartz 1998). Although Guillén in particular became an ardent communist, ultimately attributing the suffering of blacks to capitalism (Ellis 1998, p. 135), Arsenio remained nonpartisan in Cuban politics before and after Castro's revolution. In addition, Urrutia and Alberto Arredondo, drawing in part on the notion of the "New Negro" as devised by their African American contemporary Alain Locke, viewed Afro-Cuban culture as having evolved over time, constituting an indivisible part of Cuban national culture (Schwartz 1998, p. 116). In discussing the music of Gilberto Valdés, a white composer of the afrocubanismo movement, Arredondo stated, "The rhythms that Valdés revives were from a bygone era of our musical development. Those rhythms integrated with others [i.e., Spanish rhythms] in a process of *superación* and synthesis what today is called Cuban music" (Arredondo 1938, p. 5).

By eschewing the black vernacular traditions of their respective nations, Locke, Urrutia, Arredondo, and many others conceded to some of the tenets of white supremacy (see Ramsey 2003, p. 114). As Lisa Brock points out, the ideas of "superación" and "racial uplift" significantly shaped the discourse on race and national identity among the black middle class of both Cuba and the United States (Brock 1998, p. 18). For those blacks throughout the Americas who espoused the prevailing social Darwinist ideology of the day, claiming Africanness would have bound "them to a continent cast as primitive and backward while separating them from the dominant notions of civilization and progress" (*ibid.*).

Arsenio, on the other hand, always affirmed his blackness and African heritage. He was never influenced artistically or philosophically by the high modernisms of Europe, nor was he preoccupied with how he appeared to whites, as seemed to be the case with Locke and other black American and Cuban intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s (see West 1999, pp. 453–54). And though he never promoted Marcus Garvey's back to Africa movement, he did advocate and celebrate African independence from political and ideological colonial rule, as Frantz Fanon did in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (see Fanon 1968, pp. 41–46). Ultimately, in accordance with the African diasporic condition of double

consciousness, Arsenio always felt and affirmed his “double-ness”—*cubano* and *negro*—not as contradictory halves of an ambiguous whole but as a subversive act against Cuba’s dominant notions of race and national identity.³² He continued to affect the reevaluation of Cuba’s African heritage, thereby exposing mestizaje and superación as ideological acquiescence to the racial logic that produced and sustained slavery and colonialism in the first place, through the development of his conjunto and son montuno style.