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Introduction

An elderly guitarist/singer and violinist sit on plastic chairs in the back yard of a home in East Havana that has been rented by Cuban family members visiting from Miami. The musicians sip canned soda (a luxury in contemporary Cuba) as a few guests sit expectantly nearby. Others prepare food, chase after young children, play cards, or jump in and out of a small swimming pool. Almost all attendees at this event are white Cubans. The musicians have been hired to make an informal musical offering to the spirit world, and the guitarist asks his hosts whether they have any pieces in mind that they'd like to hear. They say "no"; whatever the duo chooses to play is fine. Musicians Roy Vázquez and María Teresa Gómez Noguera begin with an instrumental version of a bolero by Ernesto Lecuona from the early twentieth century: "Siempre en mi corazón" (Always in My Heart). They continue with a few *plegarias* or traditional hymns in Spanish from the local Spiritist tradition – "La luz redentora" (The Redeeming Light), "Misericordia" (Mercy), etcetera – then segue to a series of Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican boleros: "Quiéreme mucho" (Love Me Deeply), "El reloj" (The Clock), "Madrigal" – before switching to a famous chachachá, "El bodeguero" (The Shopkeeper). Following a break, they continue with a *plegaria* to the Virgin of Charity, Cuba's mixed-race patron saint, then a popular song by Miguel Matamoros ("Mi veneración") about visiting the Virgin of Charity's shrine in El Cobre valley. Toward the end of their performance, as rum and beer circulate freely, the musicians increase the tempo of their music and incorporate catchy choral refrains into their set that reference the *orishas*[1]

[1] *Orishas* are spirit deities derived from Yoruba religions. They are tied to historical African figures and simultaneously understood to embody fundamental aspects of human life such as motherhood, masculinity, wisdom, sensuality, etcetera.

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Ochún and Yemayá with phrases such as "*Deja que Yalodde te toque, y deja que Yalodde te pase la mano*" (Let the regal queen [Ochún] touch you, let her pass her hand over you").[2] To conclude, they have the crowd clap along with a series of choruses taken from commercial music of the mid-twentieth century: the refrain of "Amalia Batista" from the *zarzuela* of the same name: "*Amalia Batista, Amalia mayombe, ¿qué tiene esa negra que amarra a los hombres?*" (Amalia Batista, Amalia *mayombe*, what is it about that dark woman that attracts men so?);[3] "*Tranquilidad, Juan Francisco, tranquilidad, tranquilidad, ese revólver que tú tienes no tira ná*" (Relax, Juan Francisco, relax, that revolver you have there won't shoot at all);[4] "*Monta mi caballo que está en la puerta que da al Camino Real*" (Get on my horse that's in the door leading to the Royal Highway);[5] and others.

In another *violín* event organized near Havana's Almendares Park near the river, the crowd was racially mixed but Black participants predominated, as is more commonly the case. Several in attendance described themselves as daughters of Yemayá and the ocean but also *hijas de las dos aguas*, spiritually tied to Ochún and fresh water as well. The organizer chose to situate the event near a river because it was centrally located, and because as a forested park it represented all elements of nature.[6] She had hired a musical group including a guitarist, violinist, a flute player, and two percussionist-singers who alternated playing bongo, *güiro*, and clave. And she prepared for the activity by creating multiple altars on the ground

[2] A note on orthography: my study references many terms associated with Afro-Cuban religions and *violines* that exist primarily in oral tradition; they can be written or (or even pronounced) many different ways. For example, the word "Yalodde" that ritually salutes Ochún can also be written as "Iyalodde" (which many believe the most accurate spelling) or "Yalorde"; the Lucumí or Yoruba-influenced term for spirits of one's ancestors may be written as *egun*, *Eggun*, *eggún*, etc. When in doubt about which spelling to employ, I have chosen those found in Lydia Cabrera's (1970) collection of Yoruba/Lucumí vocabulary.

[3] This *zarzuela* features an attractive mixed-race woman as a protagonist who can pass as white and pursues affairs with elite white Cuban men. The term "*mayombe*" references Kongo religions and suggests that at least some of her appeal to men results from magic.

[4] This chorus comes from a *charanga* dance tune ("Tranquilidad, Juan Francisco" popularized by the Orquesta Jorrín in the mid-twentieth century). Its lyrics make joking metaphorical reference to Juan Francisco's sexual limitations, and may also represent an implicit plea for calm and nonviolence. It appears to have first been recorded on the Areito LP LD-4012 from 1981, *Con Jorrín en el Capri*. Thanks to Verónica González at FIUs Green Library for the reference.

[5] The refrain comes from the Miguel Matamoros composition "El fiel enamorado" ("The Faithful Romantic") from the late 1920s. The song's lyrics speak to unrequited love and a desire to elope with a young woman by riding off with her on a horse.

[6] Canto Herrera interview, December 2023.

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dedicated to the four cardinal points of the compass and to the primary elements. One was filled with lit candles to represent fire and adorned with crystals of various colors, fresh flowers, and jewelry. A second contained small glasses of water and seashells; another used stones and pieces of wood to reference the earth. A spiritual leader opened the service by asking all individuals affiliated with religions to contribute with invocations of their choosing, and later invited anyone interested in praying to other ancestral sources of energy to do so. Two *babalawos*[7] spoke, then an *iyawó* or recent initiate into Regla de Ocha,[8] then a woman initiated in Palo.[9] The organizer continued by reciting an extended prayer with words unknown to me (she later described it as a unique spiritual expression inspired by her culturally diverse spirit guides).[10] Following this introduction, the musicians began to play, continuing for about an hour and a half. Initial pieces included repertoire associated with the Catholic Church and a song in Spanish dedicated to Elegguá. Later pieces included songs to Catholic saints, to Yemayá and Babalú Ayé, and others dedicated to Kongo spirits, Gypsy and Indian spirits, and to Changó.

As may be evident from these descriptions, the term *violín* (or *toque de violín*) references a range of musical performances with ties to multiple forms of spiritual practice and to sacred and secular music making. As someone who has studied more traditional forms of African-influenced religious worship for decades, I initially found the "in-betweenness" represented by *toques de violín* unintelligible. Rather than hearing complex rhythmic patterns on *batá* drums or other percussion and chants primarily sung in African-derived languages, I encountered instead a bewildering amalgam of repertoire. Instrumental music abounds in *violines*, such as waltzes, boleros, pop hits, Tin Pan Alley songs ("Blue Moon" and "Over the Rainbow"), and light classical pieces by Cuban and European composers. Cuban popular music features prominently too, such as guitar-based *trova* and *sones* from the early twentieth century. Devotional songs dedicated to a variety of saints and other spirit entities constitute much of the repertoire too: songs to San Miguel (a powerful warrior), San Lázaro (a healer), and others. Chants to the *orishas* may be performed in relatively traditional form, as instrumental melodies, or harmonized and arranged as

[7] A *babalawo* is a priest devoted to consulting the wisdom of the *orishas* through divination.
[8] Also known as Santería, a religious system influenced by traditions derived from present-day Nigeria.
[9] A Kongo-derived religion based on channelling the forces and wisdom of spirits of the dead.
[10] Canto Herrera, WhatsApp communication, February 18, 2024.

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dance music. The ensembles accompanying such groups can include anything from accordion or synthesizer piano to cowbell. Overall, the mood associated with *violines* tends to be lighter and more festive than in sacred drumming performances. Participants enter and leave freely, many sitting passively and filming particular segments on their cell phones as if they were at a public concert. Compared with other rituals, *violines* also tend to be short, concluding within a couple of hours.

Despite their popularity today, *violín* history is poorly documented. Ethnographer Fernando Ortiz never mentions them in his expansive work from the mid-twentieth century, for instance, nor do other prominent ethnographers of the period (Lydia Cabrera, Rómulo Lachatañeré, Argeliers León).[11] The same is true of most other publications on religion and music that have appeared more recently (e.g., Bolívar 1990; Castellanos and Castellanos 1992; Barreal Fernández et al. 1998; Barnet 2001; Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2011). This lack of attention to *toques de violín* derives from multiple factors, one of which is their close ties to Spiritism as well as Santería, the former another underresearched form of worship. Diana Espírito Santo (2015, 33) describes Spiritism as "Cuba's most prolific ritual practice today," yet notes that few studies of it have been undertaken, possibly because many scholars of Caribbean religion prefer to explore traditions more exclusively tied to the African diaspora. Spiritism, and especially *espiritismo cruzado* (crossed or integrated Spiritism, the most common form), fuse influences from orthodox and folk Catholicism, Spiritism as practiced in Europe, and multiple West African-derived religions (Leé Llosas 2005, 11). Indeed, *espiritismo cruzado* has strongly influenced the structure and organization of all *violines* and inspired an entire subgenre of performance: the *violín espiritual* (see Chapter 3). Researchers may have also overlooked *violines* because of a tendency to study Cuban religions and religious music according to discrete taxonomies: Yoruba-influenced beliefs, Kongo rites, Abakuá rites, Dahomeyan practices, and so on (e.g., León 1984).[12] *Toques de violín*, representing an especially complex amalgam of diverse practices, do not fit neatly into any such category.

[11] See, for instance, Lachatañeré 1992 (a collection of works written the 1930s and 1940s), Ortiz 1981 [1951], and Barreal Fernández 1966.

[12] The same divisions are evident in many later works, based on earlier paradigms (e.g., Guanche 1983, Matibag 1996, Barnet 2001). All recognize mixture and change in local religious systems, but don't sufficiently emphasize their fundamentally interpenetrated nature.

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It appears that devotees of Santería and Spiritism initially incorporated the violin into devotion in the early twentieth century because they associated its sound with sweetness, sophistication, maternity, and the sound of flowing water (Balbuena Gutiérrez 2003, 112; Cortes 2016). Thus, *violines* are often organized to venerate water deities and female *orishas*, especially Ochún, known for her love of sweet and elegant things. In Cuba, many now also honor Yemayá, Obatalá, Elegguá, and other deities or spirits with the same music. Early performances included only solo violins, but, as of at least the 1970s, ensembles expanded to incorporate additional instruments. An even more rapid expansion of *violín* performance took place with the religious opening in Cuba made possible by the Fourth Communist Party Congress in 1991 and its tolerant stance toward all devotion (Moore 2006, 220ff.). *Violines* (and other forms of worship) are now performed openly across the island and in its diaspora – Miami, Mexico, Venezuela, Ecuador, Toronto – and economic need has led more instrumentalists than before (including many classically trained nonbelievers) to form *violín* ensembles as a means of generating extra income.

The structure of *violines* varies, but most often incorporates ritual song sequences (*orus*) of various sorts. Most begin with a short initial set of pieces derived from the Catholic Church, the concert stage, and/or the Spiritist tradition that musicians play in front of an altar dedicated to whichever entity is being honored. These slower pieces, sometimes performed before other guests arrive, are followed by longer and livelier sequences intended for everyone to enjoy. In the case of *violines espirituales*, many *orus* typically begin with *plegarias* devoted to Catholic saints. Later sequences pay homage to locally recognized *comisiones* (families of related spirit beings), especially Kongos. *Violines* devoted primarily to the *orishas* follow a similar structure: they combine traditional songs in Lucumí (a Yoruba-influenced ritual language) with Spanish-language *plegarias* and other songs that reference the *orishas* indirectly. The *zarzuela* aria "Damisela encantadora," for example, is often performed in honor of Ochún since she is understood to be an enchanting damsel. The waltz "Sobre las olas" (Over the Waves) may serve as an offering for Yemayá because she is an ocean goddess. Or a *son* like "El huerfanito" (The Little Orphan) may be played to pay homage to Obatalá because he is believed to be a caretaker of the vulnerable, such as orphans. Later segments of *violín* celebrations tend to foreground popular repertoire or open-ended vamps that foreground improvisation. Many songs, even those with overtly religious lyrics, are accompanied by chordal harmonies on the guitar or keyboard, percussive grooves, and violin

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guajeos (syncopated, repeating melodic riffs) derived from dance music ensembles. This eclectic approach to music making, the foregrounding of pop music elements, and the fact that direct dialogue with spirits or *orishas* through possession is not the goal of *violines* all contribute to an informal atmosphere distinct from other religious rites.

Another, even looser category of performance associated with *violín* ensembles are *dones de gracia* – literally, gifts of grace or offerings of gratitude. This modality is most often organized by individuals who have not "made their saint" or have no formal religious affiliation, and they are especially common on Mother's Day. *Dones de gracia* accentuate the "festive" character of *violines* further and have virtually no formal structure (García Lacerra 2015, 45). Musicians describe them as *descargas*: free jam sessions based around repertoire with only loose ties to spirits, saints, *orishas*, or religious themes.

INTERPRETING THE VIOLÍN

How are we to interpret the emergence of *toques de violín*? What resources does this reformulation of Black religion offer to Cubans in the twenty-first century, a period of pandemic disruption and renewed economic crisis? What does the popularity of *violines* suggest about recent trends in Black religious practice, aesthetically and conceptually? Many forms of devotion combine and absorb diverse influences, of course; Johnson and Palmié (2018, 450–1) characterize Afro-Latin American religions especially as involving layered affiliations, the cultivation of "parallelisms" and "'double participation' … within larger, heterogeneous religious ecologies." Yet *violines* accentuate these tendencies in new ways, and their adoption by practitioners of Regla de Ocha is especially striking. Why are they performed regularly in tandem with or as a substitution for more traditional forms of drumming, dance, and song? I argue that *violines* express religious faith in more pluralistic ways than in the past, reconciling longstanding Afrodiasporic practices with commercial repertoire that younger worshippers are comfortable with, and that they effectively amalgamate a host of distinct belief systems into a single event. They appeal to devotees in part because their approach to worship strikes many as modern and urbane, and because they seamlessly elide the realms of the sacred and the secular, the popular and the folkloric. Following Fred Moten (2018), *violín* performance can be viewed as fugitive, moving beyond externally imposed boundaries or categories and

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weaving together cultural objects or elements that formerly had little relation to one another.

It is worth emphasizing that while practitioners of Afro-Cuban religious music have perpetuated some songs and dances across many generations with little change, the same repertoire has a long history of being transformed radically in commercial music contexts. Beginning at least in the 1920s and 1930s with the rise of the *afrocubanismo* movement, religious themes, melodies, and terminology began to appear in the recordings of ensembles such as the Septeto Habanero and Septeto Nacional, the compositions of Margarita Lecuona and Gilberto Valdés, as well as in poetry, prose, visual art, and other media (Moore 1997). The trend accelerated into the mid-twentieth century with commercial releases by Celia Cruz, Merceditas Valdés, Chano Pozo, Gina Martín, and Celina González, and has been perpetuated more recently in the music of Irakere, Batacumbele, Mezcla, Síntesis, NG La Banda, collaborations between Wynton Marsalis and Pedrito Martínez, etcetera.[13] On concert stages and elsewhere, performers have long blurred the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. Even so, the embrace of pop music in devotional contexts represents something new.

Practitioners view *violines* as a distinct form of expression not to be confused with drumming-based worship (*tambores*) that has the explicit goal of calling down the *orishas*. For the most part, the religious community has embraced *violines*, yet their approach to worship represents enough of a break with established practice to generate many differences of opinion. Certainly the harmonizing of Afrodescendant devotional chants with Western chord sequences and the "dancifying" of praise songs represent significant stylistic changes – and, some might say, radical ones. Hearing sacred songs performed as fun-loving dance tunes fundamentally affects the "interpretive moves" (Feld 1984) by which audience members evaluate them. Such an approach encourages participants to respond to sung prayers as a form of popular culture, both conceptually and in terms of physical movement. Many adaptations of repertoire seem to consciously blur the boundaries of spirituality, using sound as a means of generating affect and pleasure while they tack between references to mundane and religious themes.

Violines complicate any fixed sense of genre because of their amalgamated nature, the varied musical forms they incorporate, and their lack of

[13] Regarding Marsalis and Martínez, see their amazing Carnegie Hall performance from 2014, available on YouTube: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=huGNcMoXCkY&t=3055s (accessed September 21, 2023).

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consistent structure from one event to the next. They could be described as taking Danilo Orozco's (2001) notion of "inter-genre" – denoting a musical style that foregrounds intertextuality – to new extremes. They might also be characterized as a "performance complex" (Madrid and Moore 2013, 10–11) in that they create only a loosely defined space of affect whose specific manifestations are determined by the needs of the organizer. The *violín* construct weaves together entirely distinct repertoires and stylistic referents, all of which may be emphasized or de-emphasized at any given moment.

Moten's notion of fugitivity helps frame *violín* performance as part of a broader array of Afrodiasporic expression in the Americas. The essence of Black performance for Moten involves an ongoing refusal to accept externally imposed boundaries, categories, standards, or orthodoxies, the weaving together of cultural objects or elements that formerly had little relation to one another (Wallace 2018), and, in many cases, an embrace of the vernacular and apolitical in addition to the spiritual. In *Stolen Life* (2018), Moten writes that, in jazz and other forms of African American music, fugitivity entails "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It's a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument" (131). Moten frames Black fugitivity as emergent, improvised, "a poesis of explicitly 'informal' form-giving in performance and music" (Schulman 2021, 274) and in everyday social practices. He views vitality and freedom as inherent to such expression, imagined not as chaos or an absence of structure but as an act that makes sense of things, moving across boundaries, weaving together diverse cultural realities. Moten (2018, 287) perceives "a structural antagonism between institutionalized (white) forms and informal (black) sociality" within jazz that also helps explain the dynamics of *violín* performance and its complex amalgams. *Violines* from this perspective can be viewed as transcending reified categories, challenging existing orthodoxies, working to unify the sacred and the secular, and refashioning spirituality to conform to the fractured realities of life in postslave and postcolonial contexts. Following this framing, I view *violines* as an antigenre of sorts that defy easy classification (perhaps to an even greater extent than jazz, since their meanings extend far beyond the sonic) and that change form constantly as they draw on multiple elements of Afrodiasporic and Eurodescendant music and religiosity. *Violines* contribute to a space of "elastic spirituality" that accommodates, welcomes, and reconciles diverse elements of primarily subaltern Caribbean experience.

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This study contributes to scholarship on Cuban and Caribbean religions and music extending beyond the confines of current literature in various ways. Existing publications on the music of Santería, for instance, focus primarily on topics such as percussion instruments and rhythms, song forms, texts, cosmology, and traditional ritual practices (e.g., Murphy 1994, Amira and Cornelius 1999), the biographies of particular performers (Vélez 2000, Vaughan and Aldama 2012), the codification of Black religious practices and ideologies toward particular political ends (Palmié 2002), or government attempts to regulate and folklorize religious performance (Hagedorn 2001). By contrast, my study examines new entanglements between the sacred and the secular and new appropriations of Eurodescendant cultural forms on the part of practitioners. It thus re-examines the notion of Black religious music making itself. It analyzes a poorly documented form of expression and its relation to the many sociopolitical changes the country has experienced in recent decades. I argue that *violines* represent a fascinating point of intersection between repertoires and beliefs, and that participants engage with them in many ways and to different ends. On some level, *violines* attest to multiple tendencies simultaneously: the continued mainstreaming of Afrodescendant religious traditions and their ongoing engagement with other, more commercial forms of music and culture; the ever-wider influence of Spiritism on multiple forms of devotion; and perhaps also the gradual loss of esoteric Lucumí religious knowledge among present-day practitioners of Regla de Ocha and their preference for Spanish-language texts. Some now find it easier to pay homage to Ochún or Yemayá without learning as many traditional songs and dances, for instance.[14] Yet *violines* also attest to the creation of new spaces of worship for the initiated and the uninitiated, and to the expansion of religious communities and their music making.

Miraima García Lacerra's BA thesis from 2015 represents the most substantive investigation on *violines* to date and provides useful background information, as does Ana Koprivica's masters thesis (2002) and an article derived from it (2010). Cuban musicologists (Casanova Oliva 1988; Balbuena 2003) have discussed *violines* briefly in works devoted to broader topics. Filmmaker Ernesto Sotto released a documentary in 2009, *El misterio de las aguas*, about devotion to the Caridad del Cobre (closely associated with the *orisha* Ochún) and includes footage of a *toque de violín*.

[14] See also Ochoa 2020 for a discussion of more traditional *orisha* worship involving drumming that similarly incorporates phrases in Spanish.

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He later wrote about the experience of attending that same event (Sotto 2012), during which at least one participant was possessed by a spirit guide. Afro-Cuban author Inés María Martiatu published a fictive short story (2008) describing *violines* from the perspective of a Black female musician. Johnny Frías (2015) published an article on *violines* as performed in Miami. Most recently, Finnish musicologist Ville Livari wrote a dissertation on forms of violin improvisation within the ceremonies (2023). Aside from these efforts, and one commercial CD release (Oviedo and Pinelli 2011), the only material readily available for consultation about *toques de violín* is the (substantial) video footage of them uploaded to YouTube by practitioners themselves and the webpages created by some performers to advertise their services. Related publications on the music of Cuban Spiritism are also scanty, though Axel Hesse's publications (1971, 1975) provide a useful point of departure.

Umbanda and Quimbanda in southern Brazil, as studied by Marc Gidal (2016), suggest many parallels between creole Caribbean religions and other Afrodiasporic practices. Gidal analyzes boundaries and boundary-crossing between various forms of religion, especially Batuque (a more heavily African-inspired drumming and song practice similar to Candomblé), Umbanda, and Quimbanda (also involving drumming traditions but more heavily influenced by Spiritism). *Violín* practitioners demonstrate less interest in maintaining boundaries and incorporate less drumming than the groups discussed by Gidal, yet the broad contours of such practices in Brazil – with their foregrounding of lineages (*linhas*) of spirit guides defined by race/ethnicity (including *ciganos* or Roma/Gypsies, *pretos velhos* or the spirits of African slaves, and Amerindian spirits such as *caboclos* or the *linha guarani*), and a heavy emphasis on devotional songs known as *pontos cantados* – bear a striking resemblance to *espiritismo cruzado* as practiced in Cuba.[15] The use of the *rabeca*, a northeastern Brazilian folk violin, in commercial recordings of Afro-Indigenous Jurema devotional songs by Maciel Salu parallel the Cuban practices discussed in this book to an extent as well,[16] though they represent the product of a single artist rather than a widespread tendency.

Some devotional practices in southern Haiti, particularly those dedicated to *lwa blâ* or white/foreign spirit deities, involve playing minuets

[15] See also Matory (2005, 30) for further discussion of the diverse spirits worshipped in Brazilian *caboclos* including Tupi Indians, mixed-race cowboys, and Turks.

[16] Cory LaFevers (2019) has discussed this phenomenon in Salu's recent release *Libertade*, drawing on the work of Cavalcante Rosa (2009) and others.

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and contradances on the violin, accompanied by frame and hand drums and figure dancing (Lowenthal 1978, 401–2; see also Averill and Yi 2003, 278–80; Yi 1995, 419–72). This style of worship, part of an event known as a *bâboch violô* or all-night violin party/dance, suggests certain parallels with the Cuban *toque de violín*, though the repertoire derives primarily from instrumental European dance tunes as performed in colonial times. Averill notes[17] that Haitian *bâboch violô* is rare in the present day and is confined to small regions of the country. Colombian *violín caucano* tradition represents another form of Black violin repertoire derived from the colonial era, yet it has no religious ties. Also known locally as *violín negro*, its performers use either a standard violin or a folkloric variant made of guadua wood, a subspecies of bamboo.[18]

Finally, the *hatajo* (or *atajo*) *de negritos* from the southern coast of Peru deserves mention as a Black violin tradition that loosely parallels Cuban *violines* because of its religious associations. The term *hatajo* derives from the verb *atajar*, used to describe the herding of cattle. Ensembles consist of dozens of dancers and musicians (the latter performing primarily on guitars, violins, and hand percussion such as strings of bells) who process through the streets at Christmastime, most notably in towns such as El Carmen or San Regis. Performances combine elements of African, Andean/Indigenous, and European heritage. *Hatajo* music is performed in a brisk duple or triple meter; it incorporates prominent drone pitches accompanying short, repetitive melodic phrases and is danced *zapateado*-style. UNESCO recognizes *hatajo* as a form of Intangible Cultural Heritage, linked both to colonial-era religious devotion such as the *villancico* and to local histories of slavery and discrimination.[19]

VIOLINES AS AFRODIASPORIC RELIGION

Questions of terminology quickly come to the fore when analyzing Cuban *violines*, including the issue of whether they should be considered part of

[17] Personal email, April 28. 2021.

[18] Thanks to Cindia Arango López for bringing this practice to my attention. For more information, see the following links: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcRTPoeK_xU (accessed May 21, 2024); https://bit.ly/4hCUPBT; https://bit.ly/41fGghN (accessed May 3, 2023).

[19] Representative performances can be viewed online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGsVGvwVsIY, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ow_hC-obaJI, and www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQqAbVZhOPg (accessed October 24, 2024). My thanks to Pilar Cáceres Cartagena for bringing the practice to my attention. More information about the practice is available here: https://bit.ly/3ECqjcu.

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Black religious systems at all. Certainly the public for *violines* transcends racial boundaries, and much of the musical repertoire performed by *violín* ensembles derives from sources other than African or Black communities. Additionally, as Arisbel López Andraca notes, Caribbean religion and music making are both spheres of activity that have contributed to the erasure of racial barriers and social segregation. For these reasons, some scholars, especially within Cuba, take issue with terms like "Black religion" and avoid them.[20] Instead, researchers Lázara Menéndez Vázquez (2005a) and Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla (1997) employ phrases such as "religions of African origin" when referring to Ocha, Palo, and Abakuá rites, and, at least as often, broader terms without any racial referents, such as *religiosidad popular* (see also Leé Llosas 2005, 14; Carranza Fuentes 2011, 157). This may derive from a broader tendency within Cuba to downplay race as a determinant of social experience, and out of recognition that the racialization of religion was first used as a means of denying the legitimacy of and criminalizing Black devotion, for instance in Fernando Ortiz's early works (1973 [1906]). By contrast, terms such as "Afro-Cuban religion," "Black diasporic religion," "Yoruba-inspired," "African-imagined," or "African-inspired" are common in the writings of scholars based abroad, primarily when discussing Regla de Ocha and Palo (e.g., Beliso-De Jesús 2015, 2; Matibag 1996, vi–vii; Murphy 1994, 4; Ochoa 2010, 8; Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2011, 33). These authors underscore the origins of such worship among the slave population, in maroon encampments, and in urban *cabildos* (Black mutual aid societies) as a form of cultural resistance.

Literature on Spiritism in Latin America written by local and foreign scholars tends to even more consistently foreground Afrodescendant influences, perhaps to distinguish such practices from their European counterparts. Gidal (2016, 6) notes that practitioners of Umbanda (similar to *espiritismo cruzado*) refer to their religion as "Afro-gaucho"[21] in order to recognize its embrace of both African and European elements. He states (2016, 23) that spirits of Black ancestry are prominent in the devotional pantheon and underscores the degree to which it has been influenced by the African diaspora. Brandon (1993, 3) views Cuban Spiritism and even Latin American Catholicism as strongly influenced by African religions and thus

[20] Thanks to López Andraca for corresponding with me about these issues in September and October of 2019, and for introducing me to the recent works of many Cubanist scholars of religion.

[21] The term "gaucho" emphasizes the rural and primarily white ranching population in the area the study took place.

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part of a Black diasporic tradition. Castellanos and Castellanos (1992, 192), Leé Llosas (2005, 19), and Espírito Santo (2015, 37–8, 59) all describe Cuban Spiritism as Black, partly because of its close ties to Ocha and Palo and because of the predominance of African spirit guides: Taita José, Ta Francisco, Ta Lorenzo Lucumí, Juan Mandinga, El Gangá, El Macuá, etcetera. All these entities manifest in *misas espirituales* (a form of creole séance), even when they are presided over by white mediums who have no affiliation with Ocha or Palo. Since Spiritism and Santería are the religious systems that most directly inform *toques de violín*, I also argue that *violines* should be considered Afro-Cuban. My view aligns with that Beliso-De Jesús (2015, 7) in framing them as a form of devotion that manifests "blackened ontologies" and racialized conceptions of the spiritual world drawn heavily from the African diaspora.

The way in which *toques de violín* straddle the boundary between religious and secular expression forces us to question whether they should be viewed as religious per se or only tied to a broader notion of spirituality. The latter I define as concern with the human soul or spirit as opposed to involvement in organized religious institutions or activities. Clifford Geertz (1973, 90) famously defined religion as a system of symbols "that establish powerful and long-lasting moods and motivations" in those who ascribe to them, helping define their understanding of the supernatural and guiding many of their everyday actions. By these criteria, *violines* are clearly religious in that they dialogue with and are informed by broader understandings of the divine. The fact that secular, bawdy, and irreverent moments feature prominently in *violines* as well does not negate their strong religious valence. Additionally, participants in *violines* also tend to worship in other, more traditional contexts as well. Thus, the overarching conceptual frame surrounding *violines* is congruent with Afrodescendant religious practice and might be considered a more secular variant of it.

Some authors describe African-influenced religions as manifesting a greater openness to external influences and to change than most other belief systems; on that basis, might the very newness and nontraditional nature of *violines* tie them to diasporic culture? Mintz and Price (1992, 45–7, 51), as one example, underscore the "additive ethos" of West and Central African religions, an acceptance of difference, an allowance for personal creative embellishment, and an expectation of cultural change as core elements. They note that the perpetuation of African religions in something approaching their original form in the Americas represents the exception rather than the rule. Ochoa (2010, 8) comes to similar conclusions. And David Font-Navarrete also perceives

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a fluidity to Afro-Cuban religion that allows for movement from one setting, language, format, or ritual context to another.[22] The association of particular *orishas* with Catholic saints represents one aspect of such fluidity, as do perceived equivalencies between certain Palo and Ocha spirits, the relatively free movement of song repertoires between Ocha worship, the *misa espiritual*, and *cajón de muerto* celebrations (discussed in Chapter 2), and between all of these modalities and *violines*.

TERMS OF CULTURAL DISLOCATION

Questions of terminology arise when considering how to describe the many cultural fusions and inter-influences found in *toques de violín*; such decisions are made against a backdrop of shifting understandings of culture in the humanities and social sciences. For some time these disciplines have described culture as emergent, shifting, mutable, contested, and heterogeneous, and they emphasize that all cultural forms involve fusion and mixture (e.g., Rosaldo 1995, xv). This is especially true in an era of mass migration, international markets, global communication, and in a region such as the Caribbean long known for cultural forms incorporating diverse influences (Bilby 1985). To what extent, then, is it useful or appropriate to discuss the striking displays of cultural mixture in *toques de violín* as different from diverse cultural influences found in other expressive forms, and, if so, from what perspective and using which concepts? I argue that much existing terminology must be used cautiously, and that it should align with local experiences and cultural politics. In the following paragraphs I discuss a few of the most commonly employed terms for cultural mixture from this perspective, most of which have been championed by foreign scholars.

Syncretism has become a polemical construct when describing Latin American heritage, largely because of its ties to colonialist expansion. Most tellingly, Catholic Church officials adopted it in the seventeenth century to deride local religious forms in the Americas believed to be aberrant and to contrast them with "true" orthodox beliefs (Stewart 2009, 204). Melville Herskovits attempted a revival of the term among academics in the 1930s; later authors have reframed it further in relation to notions of dominance and hegemony (e.g., Aijmer 1995) and have even proposed the additional term "anti-syncretism" to describe a resistance to cultural adaptation and the perpetuation of established cultural boundaries (Stewart and

[22] Zoom conversation, March 30, 2021.

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Shaw 1994). Opinions differ about whether the concept of syncretism is fundamentally flawed. Many present-day authors in and beyond Cuba avoid it, though it still appears in some publications.[23] Cuban historian Zoila Lapique Becali advocates adopting syncretism from a subaltern perspective to describe the subversion of imposed hegemonic norms.[24] Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996) provides another perspective, describing syncretic culture as inherently unstable, fragmented, and heterogeneous – a condition he views as a metaphor for the Caribbean itself. In discussing the Caridad del Cobre as a complex sign, for example, he suggests she be viewed not as a synthesis or unified whole, but rather as an aggregate of signifiers "made of differences" (1996, 12). I find the term potentially useful when analyzing the cultural assemblages found in *toques de violín*, though I prefer the locally generated terminology discussed in this section.

Notions of hybridity have a contested history as well, though one that only spans a few decades. In part the popularization of the term is linked to the rise of globalization studies, neoliberalist economics, a recognition of the ever more rapid movement of culture and ideas internationally, and a sense that cultural expression is increasingly transitory and malleable. García Canclini's work in the 1990s first tied the notion of hybridity to Latin America; he described the region as caught between traditional belief systems (characterized problematically in his writings as "premodern") and those imposed first through colonial dominance and later the influence of cosmopolitan urban elites. García Canclini's emphasis on the interpenetration of the foreign and the local resonates with Paul Gilroy's (1993, 35) descriptions of Black Atlantic cultures as fragmented through colonial and postcolonial encounters. In subsequent years, numerous critiques have been leveled at hybridity scholarship: for instance, that it fails to sufficiently interrogate concepts such as "traditional culture" which represent the constitutive parts of hybrid forms, and that in certain respects it perpetuates outmoded and apolitical notions of *mestizaje* from the mid-twentieth century (Nederveen Pieterse 2001). In response, scholars have tended to frame their analyses of hybridity in more overtly political terms within overarching structures of dominance (Stokes 2004), and/or to analyze the strategic uses of hybrid cultural forms on the part of local communities. While recognizing

[23] E.g., Castellanos and Castellanos 1992, 195; Leé Llosas 2005, 22.

[24] In the documentary *El misterio de las aguas* (Sotto 2012), for instance, she states "El sincretismo fue la forma de enmascarar a las deidades ancestrales africanas con las deidades católicas … Como decía una vieja ex-esclava que yo tuve la suerte de conocer con Lydia Cabrera, 'Mis orishas tienen un nombre en Yoruba, y tienen un nombre en español.'"

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the limitations of the term, I do occasionally use it to draw attention to striking juxtapositions of musical style in *violines*. Of course, the notion of hybridity generally fails to capture a full sense of the dynamic and emergent cultural space *violín* performance creates, and does not address what such fusions mean to participants.

In my analysis I more typically adopt other terms of cultural mixture derived from the Caribbean itself, such as "transculturation," coined by Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s (Moore 2018b, 27–9) and "creolization," initially championed by Black literary theorists of the 1960s such as Eduard Glissant (Moore 2010, 19–21). Ortiz framed transculturation as an alternative to Herskovits's earlier concept of acculturation; Ortiz viewed the latter as more multilinear, less focused on the impact of dominant or Eurocentric culture on non-Western populations. And he attempted, with a series of related terms (deculturation, neoculturation, metastasis, metalepsis), to more clearly define some of the ways cultural forms move between classes, racial/ethnic groups, and others. Those who advocate the use of transculturation today (e.g., Palmié 2013, 97) note that it suggests constant adaptation on the part of multiple groups and, thus, endlessly shifting or transient cultural exchanges as a component of the Caribbean experience. Some describe this implicitly "centerless" model as a precursor to postmodernist thought (Benítez-Rojo 1996, 150ff.), though others question whether Ortiz's writings imply belief in what he perceived as "pure" cultural forms derived from Africa and elsewhere before their integration in the Americas (Pavez Ojeda 2016). While the notion of transculturation remains useful, the model as conceived by Ortiz does not necessarily interrogate the motivations for cultural adaptation, nor does it emphasize the agency of musicians or religious practitioners within the creative processes central to *violines*.

Creolization as theorized by Glissant experienced a renaissance of sorts in the new millennium and has been foregrounded in numerous publications (Buisseret 2000; Chaudenson 2001; Stewart 2007; Lionnet and Shih 2011). It has its origins in the Portuguese word *crioulo*, referring first to a slave raised in a master's house, and by extension to Africans displaced from their homeland in new surroundings (Stewart 2009, 201–2).[25] Its etymology thus speaks to physical and cultural dislocation, and, accordingly, the strategies of those subjected to such experiences. Later in the Spanish-speaking Americas, the parallel term *criollo* originally came to denote anything of European origin

[25] Lorraine Leu (personal communication) notes that the term *crioulo* has tremendously negative associations in modern Portuguese, being roughly equivalent with the "n-word."

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transplanted to or re-established in the New World, especially white/peninsular immigrants. To colonial-era authors in Spain, white creole populations were often associated negatively with the loss of habits or established practices. But increasingly in the twentieth century, Caribbeanists have reconceived the concept to emphasize the creative fusion or blending of cultural elements over time and the fashioning of something new and unique out of them. In this way, creolization does foreground local agency on the part of Black or mixed-race populations and implicitly references broader patterns of dominance and resistance that have long characterized the region (Camal 2019). Creative processes of creolization have allowed Afrodescendent groups to survive the processes of cultural and psychological genocide initiated by the slave trade, as noted by Reynaldo Fernández Pavón.[26] Because of the term's grassroots resonance and transgressive associations, I find creolization one of the most useful ways of denoting processes of religious cultural fusion.

All of the concepts mentioned here can be useful in analyzing *violines*, yet I would argue that none is entirely satisfactory given the challenges to established practice that such performance represents. By their very nature *violines* subvert normative constructs of religion, even *orisha* worship, and blur the binary of sacred/secular. They create a performance space that does not allow for singular forms of expression of any kind. Music making across established boundaries becomes not only the norm but the only acceptable option; the world of *violín* performance forcefully rejects unilinear views of culture.

The multilayered nature Afro-Cuban religions makes any analysis of them a daunting task; this is especially true because of the many ways they have influenced one another since the earliest days of colonization (Mintz and Price 1992, 3). Contemporary ethnographies documenting the lives of practitioners underscore the extent of this interpenetration. Ochoa (2010, 55, 145; 2020, 78), for instance, describes rural Cuban devotion in which Palo and Ocha influences mix freely, and he notes that Palo Kimbisa and other Kongo-influenced traditions freely adopt Spiritist and other practices. Espírito Santo (2015, x) similarly describes Black Cuban religious domains (Lucumí, Palo, Spiritist) as intertwined, noting that her primary consultants were involved in all of them. Additional examples underscoring connections between Afrodiasporic religious spheres include the memoirs of Irna, as compiled by Feraudy Espino (1999), and the biographies of percussionist Felipe García Villamil (Vélez 2000), the religious figures Eva

[26] Personal email, November 19, 2023.

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Fernández Bravo (Mikelsons 2005), Alfredo Calvo Cano (Beliso-De Jesús 2015), and others interviewed by José Millet (1993). These publications make the case that Black religious traditions must be viewed as a collective, rather than as distinct beliefs.

Brief discussion of the positionality of authors writing on Caribbean religions is appropriate here. With a few exceptions – Rómulo Lachatañeré, Rogelio Martínez Furé, Tomás Fernández Robaina – most prominent authors on Afro-Cuban religions (local and foreign) are white, and many are non-practitioners. Collectively, these scholars have been accused of intellectual theft, stealing secrets and mystical knowledge from their informants to further their own careers (see Beliso-De Jesús 2015, 33), as well as of sensationalizing aspects of devotion in their publications, such as the ritual sacrifice of animals or the invocation of *orisha* spirits. This was especially true in the mid-twentieth century. As a white researcher myself, and with no overt religious affiliations, I am forced to confront this uncomfortable legacy, something Martínez Furé describes as *jineterismo pseudocultural*[27] and that resonates with many recent critiques in anthropology, ethnomusicology, and related disciplines. David Font-Navarrete expresses concern with this aspect of religious scholarship that he believes implicates him as well (even as a Hispanic *santero*);[28] he notes that it speaks to the extent of white privilege in the Americas, to stark divisions between elites and communities of color, and, more broadly, to the importance of considering racial dynamics in all facets of academia. I have not resolved this issue to my satisfaction, but I have tried to foreground Black voices and perspectives throughout the book, following the pathbreaking scholarship of Tomás Fernández Robaina (2001), who was one of the first to allow believers a chance to express their opinions directly in print. I hope my work affords the religious community a small measure of additional representation, and that the project documents and legitimizes a form of expression they care deeply about. The only factor making a study of *violines* somewhat less problematic than other religious modalities is that they do not typically lead to possession. For that reason, receiving permission to film performances was often possible (drumming events cannot be filmed), and for the most part participants seemed genuinely interested in discussing in *violines* with Melena Francis Valdés, Rosy Bayona Mojena, and

[27] Feraudy Espino 1999, 14. *Jineterismo* derives from *jinete* or horseman. It refers to streetwise hustlers in present-day Cuba who find ways to make a living by "riding" tourists: providing them goods or services, or selling sex, in exchange for cash. Martínez Furé flips the association and makes foreign academics, especially, the focus of exploitative practices.

[28] Zoom conversation, March 30, 2021.

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me. Melena was especially effective at conducting interviews because of her personal status as a professional musician and religious practitioner consecrated in Ocha as a daughter of Ochún. Some in the Cuban religious community continue to view *violín* worship as too "light" and/or too far removed from other forms of Black devotional practice (see Chapter 2 and the conclusion), but the fact that direct interaction with spirits and *orishas* is not the goal makes it a somewhat less contentious focus of study.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

Chapter 2 provides an overview of what is known of the development of the *violines* since their inception in the early twentieth century and the influences that gave rise to them. It describes *violín* ensembles and the repertoire they play in detail, the musical backgrounds of performers, and the motivations behind organizing such an event. It discusses the relationship of *violines* to other kinds of worship, such as the *cajón de muerto*, and the contested meanings of *violín* performance in present-day Cuba. Chapter 3 explores the close ties between *misas espirituales* and the *violín* tradition. It considers the ways in which the praise songs and *plegarias* of Spiritism, and, to an extent, the structure of the *misa* itself, have influenced *violines*. Later, the chapter examines music making in Spiritist-oriented *violines*, and how musicians elaborate *plegarias* and other praise songs through acts of devotion.

Chapter 4 explores the ways that *violines* have been incorporated into Regla de Ocha worship, with an emphasis on ceremonies dedicated to Ochún, which are by far the most common. It reflects on the importance of the Caridad del Cobre as a local mixed-race saint to notions of *cubanidad* beginning in the late nineteenth century, and her strong association with Ochún on the part of *santeros*. The chapter continues by examining typical repertoire in *violines de santo* and the ways musicians make musical offerings to the *orishas*. Chapter 5, on performance dynamics, begins by stressing the degree to which individual *violín* events differ from one another, stressing the elastic construct of the genre and the many modalities musicians choose from as they play. It continues by exploring spontaneity, improvisation, and verbal play in *violines* through a close analysis of several climactic sequences in particular devotional acts. Chapter 6 discusses the spread of *violines* outside of Cuba through its diaspora to Mexico City, Caracas, New York, Miami, and elsewhere, and how the tradition has changed in the process. It notes that the relatively loose notion of how to honor *orishas* and spirits in *violines* has allowed

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performers abroad to reimagine the practice as they see fit, often resulting in entirely new forms of worship. The Conclusion reflects further on the significance of *violines* to the history of Cuban and Afrodiasporic religions by comparing them with similar musical styles such as gospelypso in Trinidad, devotional samba in Brazil (Burdick 2013; Iyanga 2015, 2023), and recent fusions of Dominican sacred and secular repertoire in New York (Tallaj 2018).

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