DISPLACING MAGIC: AFRO-CUBAN STUDIES
AND THE PRODUCTION OF SANTERÍA, 1933-1956

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ABSTRACT

DAVID ADAM SHEFFERMAN: Displacing Magic: Afro-Cuban Studies and the Production of Santería, 1933-1956
(Under the direction of Ruel W. Tyson)

This study tracks magic as a recurring and ambivalent figure in early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse. In the wake of Cuba’s formal political independence in 1902, magic surfaced as a major practical concern. Public debates swirled around questions about the place of ‘primitive’ magical practices in Cuban society. In these collective discussions, African-inflected traditions in Cuba commonly stood as the embodiment of the primitive propensity to magic. The notion of “Afro-Cuban culture” emerged during the first years of independence and, in turn, the notion of “Afro-Cuban studies” as a field of social science also took shape. Thus, the title of the dissertation refers most immediately to the widespread call for the elimination, or displacement, of magic in general and of Afro-Cuban “witchcraft” [brujería] in particular as means to Cuba’s realization as a truly independent and modern society.

At the same time, magic also appeared in other ways in the public discussions on Cuba’s future. To many Cubans, modernity seemed to depend upon its own form of magic, namely, a process of commodification that transformed everything and everyone into inanimate entities for capitalist exchange. Cuban intellectuals responded by searching for critical strategies that would displace not only the magical endeavors of primitives but also what one critic identified as “the magic power of money” in modern life. The intellectuals
typically framed the critical effort to displace different forms of magic as magical in its own right.

In examining this repeated ironic gesture, the dissertation focuses especially on intellectual activity in the years after the 1933 fall of Gerardo Machado’s regime, a period of profound socio-political transition for Cubans. The study considers the intellectual production of the Afro-Cuban tradition “Santería” as an enduring and emblematic development of the times, when the island’s most prominent public figures formally inaugurated Afro-Cuban studies as field of inquiry and as an alternate forum for political action. Fernando Ortiz stands at the center of these events. The dissertation closely considers his efforts to pioneer Afro-Cuban studies as well as engagements with Ortiz’s work—both direct and indirect—by Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén, and Rómulo Lachatañeré.
PROLOGUE

“To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution . . . “

1.

In the following study, I consider the activities of Cuban intellectuals during the early twentieth century as they tried to define the new scholarly field of “Afro-Cuban studies.” The group involved in these efforts included many—if not most—of Cuba’s intelligentsia and undoubtedly revolved around the scholarship and personage of Fernando Ortiz. He was credited with pioneering Afro-Cuban studies during the early 1900s, and in the ensuing decades many writers, artists, historians, policy makers and others made use of and built on Ortiz’s ongoing efforts. In my discussion, I examine some of Ortiz’s forays into Afro-Cuban studies as well as contributions to the field by Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén, and Rómulo Lachatañeré. The latter three all drew on and engaged Ortiz’s work. Arguably, Ortiz, Carpentier, and Guillén stand as Cuba’s three most visible twentieth-century intellectuals. Lachatañeré, though little-known outside of circles of Cubanist scholarship, frequently earns critical recognition as one of the most important figures in the development of Afro-Cuban studies. The examples that I investigate by these four writers date from different moments between the mid-1930s and mid-1950s, but they continually refer back to the formation of Afro-Cuban studies around Ortiz at the beginning of the century.

Curiously, in the course of trying to make sense of this material, the epigraph above continually resurfaced. I did not plan on the recurrence, but at a certain point I realized that
the phrase related to the history of Afro-Cuban studies in a fundamental, even if unexpected, way. The remark appears in an article by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin about the Paris-based Surrealist activities of the late 1920s. Benjamin presents his essay—written in 1929—as “the last snapshot of the European intelligentsia,” and his comment functions as a summary of “the project about which Surrealism circles in all of its books and enterprises.”

As I moved deeper into my research, I increasingly recognized the relation of Benjamin’s characterization of Surrealist “enterprises” to the group of Cuban intellectuals I was considering. Most immediately, Ortiz and his partners in Afro-Cuban studies were direct contemporaries of “the European intelligentsia” that Benjamin discussed. But, more than mere contemporaneity, what especially struck me was how the Cubans also looked for ways “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution.” Like the Surrealists, a self-constituted cluster of Cuban intellectuals endeavored to transform contemporary societies, beginning with Cuba itself. In pursuing social revolution, the Cubans frequently talked about—and searched for ways to generate—exuberant collective experiences. The intellectuals imagined such events, coursing with enthusiastic or “intoxicating energies,” as the means to revitalize social orders that had lost most of their vitality under the mechanizations of modern life. The oft-repeated idea was that if people ‘lost’ themselves during some shared event then they would find new, stronger social bonds in place of the rampant individualism and alienation that seemed to define the modern experience.

From that standpoint, the members of the Cuban intelligentsia about whom I was learning paralleled their European contemporaries in developing modernist critiques of modernity. Both groups drew on ideas and techniques of the self-proclaimed “modernism” unfolding in the literary and plastic arts as well as in philosophy and social science. As an
historian of discourses on religion and magic, I was particularly interested in how both the Surrealists and Cubans looked toward ritual in searching for socially transformative experiences. As each group saw it, the ceremonies of so-called ‘primitives’ created an enviable social interdependence, one that connected members of a community and made their lives richer and more meaningful. Not surprisingly, a problem remained for these self-identified “moderns”: how to recover the revitalizing energy of ‘primitive’ rituals without falling prey to the ignorance that defined ‘primitives’ as primitive and apparently drove them to ceremonial undertakings in the first place.

For the Surrealists and Cubans alike nothing symbolized more than magic the paradoxes surrounding ritual. From their perspective, magic involved systematic efforts to intervene in the world through the establishment of material correspondences: an individual magician or a magically inclined group would create representations—images, effigies, chants, material composites, and the like—in order to generate effects related to, or literally embodied by, the propitiatory figures. The Cuban intellectuals admired the bombastic spirit of magic but decried its fallacious pretenses; they identified with the impulse underlying magic—to transform lived conditions—but disparaged practitioners’ misguided convictions about the power to engender such change.

The title of the dissertation—Displacing Magic—encapsulates this ambivalence. On one hand, the intellectuals targeted magical practices, with their roots in false notions of causality and power, as an impediment to the proper development of contemporary societies. On the other hand, modern intelligentsia also wanted to channel the revolutionary impulses behind magical endeavors into new forms of social transformation. My main argument follows from these points: according to their own terms, the intellectuals figured their
enterprises, including efforts to displace ‘primitive’ magic, as magical. They developed their own, paradoxical form of *displacing magic*. And as modernist critique of modernity, that endeavor also pointed at a certain “magic” endemic to modern life, namely, commodification.

2.

Still, my study—and its title—ultimately addresses Cuban intellectuals more than European Surrealists. So how does “displacing magic” separate from Surrealism and attach more exclusively to early-twentieth-century intellectuals engaged in Afro-Cuban studies? I discovered that, in this regard too, Benjamin served as an illuminating point of contact. As my research developed, I found that the contemporaneity of the revolutionary “enterprises” among the European and Cuban intelligentsia cut deeper. Benjamin had not simply exposed parallel endeavors. Rather, the two fields of activity bled together in particular, geographic places, such as Paris. In some cases, Cubans participated in Surrealist activities; in every case, they were aware of their European counterparts. And in a number of situations, the Surrealists made their way to Latin America and Cuba, particularly with the rising tide of fascism during the 1930s.

However, the more intimate that the Cubans became with the European and North American intelligentsia, the more they tried to distinguish themselves as unique, as something other than copycats. As I proceed, I show how the early-twentieth-century Cuban discourse of displacing magic—and, in a related way, an emerging field of “Afro-Cuban studies”—developed largely out of experiences of displacement—as much literal as figurative—when Cubans found themselves by choice and by circumstance off the island and
in places like Madrid, Paris, and New York. In those contexts, Afro-Cuban studies and the
discourse on magic served as means to differentiate Cuba and Cubans. As my account
unfolds Benjamin surfaces regularly, not only as a commentator. As a continually displaced
member of the European intelligentsia, he appears as an important character in the story I
tell. For, like the Surrealists about whom he wrote, Benjamin also searched for ways “to win
the energies of intoxication for the revolution.” That quest led him to his own particular,
powerful modernist critique of modernity. At points, my discussion juxtaposes, even if in a
limited way, Benjamin’s undertakings with those of his Cuban contemporaries in order to
illuminate similarities among and distinctions between efforts that arose in what I insist is a
common “discourse circuit.”

3.

If Benjamin’s remark about the Surrealist “enterprises” repeatedly surfaced in the
course of my work on the present study—first, as an illuminating commentary on
developments parallel to my main subject; second, as a commentary within the contemporary
history I outline—then the phrase continues to have further, immediate, and more personal
relevance to my project. Undoubtedly, Benjamin’s observation is historically specific. He
clearly referred to a Surrealist “project” based in Paris during the late 1920s. While I insist
that 1920s Paris—a scene seemingly on the margins of my central narrative—is still part of
the history I recount, my conviction about the significance of that tangential field of activity
derives in part from my unwavering sense that Benjamin’s comment not only relates to
Cuban intellectual life at that time but also, on some level, to my own attempt to account for
those endeavors. Benjamin’s comment identifies an underlying tension in the Surrealists’
efforts: they were intellectuals who struggled to find ways to overcome what they perceived as the limits of intellectualism. After all, intellectual pursuits—especially when held to the standard of objective detachment—are not necessarily associated with intoxicating, revolutionary energies.

As Benjamin underscored, the Surrealists hoped to explode the rationalist myth of objectivity as a key component of the deadening weight of modern life. The Cuban intellectuals I discuss felt a similar disenchantment with the familiar scholarly appeals to ‘purely’ detached knowledge that seemed to define a disenchanted modern world. Like the Surrealists, the Cubans also searched for forms of knowledge that were deliberately engaged and directed toward reenchanting contemporary life. They too felt caught between the rational pursuit of knowledge and a sense of hollowness associated with excessive rationalism. As I note in the course of my discussion, this tension surrounding intellectual undertakings continually resurfaces as endemic to what Michel Foucault identifies as a “modern order” formalized by Immanuel Kant in the late eighteenth century.

Perhaps, then, it comes as little surprise that I experienced a certain measure of that ambivalence in the course of my work on this project. The completion of a dissertation—an entrenched mechanism of modern knowledge-production—necessarily requires large stretches of isolation, so it is a curious process to retreat to solitary places as well as into the privacy of thought in order to learn and write about early-twentieth-century intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic who hoped to overcome what they considered a dangerous, disillusioning, and prevalent sense of solitude. There was—and still is—a palpable desire “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution” propelling my efforts with this dissertation. I remain uncertain about the precise contours of “the revolution” I have in mind,
but I too am certain that it depends upon the creation of vital social connections. Therefore, this dissertation—like the intellectual pursuits of the subjects of my study—necessarily remains a paradoxical entity: it bears an individual name as the mark of a solitary effort even as the project aspires toward some collective end.

4.

I make no claims about my project as victorious in pursuit of socially revolutionary “energies.” Nevertheless, I can claim some real success in the battle by insisting—all the more strongly from the perspective at the end of the process—that, after all, this individual project has been anything but solitary. As I prepare to put this study into circulation for wider consideration, I must express my profound gratitude to and deep appreciation of some of those who made the undertaking a collective affair all along. They deserve credit for any contribution this project might make. Of course, all shortcomings are my responsibility alone.

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inhabit every word (even if they do not yet understand very many of them). At the same time,
I could not be luckier than to have in Nereida a life-partner who also shares professional
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always offered continual reassurance, remarkable patience, and an inimitable ability to listen,
to understand and to respond appropriately and constructively. She has lived with this project through its extended course, and it belongs to her as much as to me.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my father, Dr. Michael Shefferman. Even in his physical absence, he remains one of my greatest teachers, an ongoing conversation partner, and a continual inspiration. My best hope is that this enterprise effectively carries forth something of his enduring spirit.
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INTRODUCTION: MAGIC AND MODERN CUBA

1.

On the evening of December 12, 1942, Dr. Fernando Ortiz delivered a talk to the Club Atenas of Havana, an old and venerable social organization comprised of Cubans proud of their “Negro ancestry and blood.” The occasion for Ortiz’s speech was his acceptance as an honorary member. Although Ortiz made no claim to any apparent “Negro ancestry,” he stood as one of Cuba’s—if not Latin America’s—towering public figures. Between 1902 and 1926—the first decades of the Cuban Republic—he had served the island’s political interests, initially as a diplomat in Spain, France and Italy and later as Liberal Party member of the Cuban Congress. However, Ortiz had earned special, international recognition as a scholar. With a doctorate in penal law, Ortiz had turned to the study of Cuba’s black population as a means of understanding—and potentially solving—a perceived crime problem in the fledging republic. Inside and outside of Cuba, he was widely credited with opening up and developing social scientific investigation into the island’s “African legacy.” By the time of his December 1942 speech, he had even earned the title of “el Tercer Descubridor,” the Third Discoverer of the Americas. The logic held that Columbus—the First Discoverer—had uncovered the route to and geographic location of the Americas and the Second Discoverer—Alexander von Humboldt—had exposed the full natural bounty of the continents. But Ortiz had revealed the general structure of American life. He had shown that the Americas, past and present, took shape through unique interactions among cultural and natural forms brought by the various
peoples who converged on the region over time. In contrast to popular thinking, he repeatedly had emphasized and documented the profound influence of African elements in the Americas in general and in Cuba in particular.

In this context of admiration for Ortiz’s achievements, Club Atenas enthusiastically tapped him for honorary membership. Ortiz gratefully accepted and chose to address the underlying theme that had led him there: racial segregation and its negative consequences. He delivered a speech, “Por la integración cubana de blancos y negros” [For the Cuban integration of whites and blacks] that, aided by subsequent publications in Spanish and in English translation, drew international attention as a profound statement on race relations and as confirmation of Ortiz’s tremendous intellectual stature.¹ In light of the enduring fame of Ortiz’s mediations upon race relations, it is significant that Ortiz spent much of his speech talking about himself. More specifically, he considered his central role in the field of Afro-Cuban studies:

For forty years, I have been an explorer engaged in classification and analysis, working with this intricate jungle of African cultural roots that have sprouted anew in Cuba, and from time to time I have published some of the results of this work as samples of what can be done and as an indication of the great deal that still remains to be done in this field of research. (Ortiz 1998: 20)

But while Ortiz suggested with this statement that Afro-Cuban studies was an established but open “field of research,” his next set of reflections reminded his audience that the current state of scholarship had emerged against all odds:

¹The transcript of Ortiz’s speech appeared weeks later in the popular Cuban press (Ortiz 1943a) and again, a few months later, in a scholarly review (Ortiz 1943b). The English translation first appeared in October 1943 as a special publication of the Pan American Union’s Points of View (Ortiz 1943c). This original English version includes an introduction by Concha Romero James that offers some background on the speech and declares its global significance. That notion is reinforced by the Pan American Union’s alteration of the title from “On the Cuban Integration of Whites and Blacks” to the universalized “On the Relations Between Blacks and Whites.” Many other editions of the speech followed in Spanish and beyond, including new, excerpted English translations in Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs 1993 and InterAmericas 1998. I refer to both those latter translations below.
I published my first volume in 1906. This was a brief tentative study of the religious and magical survivals of African cultures in Cuba. I revealed them as they were and not as they were thought to be: an extravagant variation of the white man’s witchcraft, i.e. the thousand-year-old dealings with demons or evil spirits whose classic examples are the horrible practices of European witches who sucked children’s blood and soared to their haunts on brooms.[…] In this book I introduced the expression “Afro-Cuban,” thereby avoiding the risk of using designations tainted with prejudice and moreover exactly defining the dual origin of the social phenomena I had set out to study. This word had already been used in Cuba in 1847 by Antonio de Veitía, a fact I learned due to the courtesy and great erudition of Francisco González del Valle, but it had not been incorporated into common parlance as is the case today. My first book was generally received by whites with benevolence, accompanied by the same condescending or disdainful smile which is often the reaction to Bertoldo’s anecdotes, bar-room stories and off-color jokes, while among the colored people the only reaction was ominous silence broken only by expressions of restrained hostility.[…] The years went by and I continued to work, constantly writing on kindred themes.[…] ‘What’s up this little white fellow’s sleeve?’ I heard this many times behind my back. Often they asked me to my face, ‘Why do you butt in on this Negro business? What is it to you? Wouldn’t it be better not to bother with it?’[…] Today confidence in ethnographic research is growing in Cuba and we already have a select, conscientious, capable and farsighted minority which understands that the only sure path to complete freedom from prejudices is an acquaintance with reality based on scientific investigation and on the just appreciation of facts and circumstances. (20-21)

Ortiz’s reminiscence hits upon a few key, interrelated points. The first is that his efforts “for forty years” sprang from the specific intention of confronting society’s shortcomings. Thus, his 1906 book presented African “survivals” in Cuba “as they were and not as they were thought to be.” Similarly, “a select, conscientious, capable and farsighted minority” is working “today” for “complete freedom from prejudices.” The second key point followed: the way to achieve these goals is through “classification and analysis” or, more specifically, the kind of “ethnographic research” that presents a “reality based on scientific investigation and on the just appreciation of facts and circumstances.” Ortiz’s third point of emphasis goes back to his earlier statement: Afro-Cuban studies—that viable, open “field of

2The text in parentheses is part of Ortiz’s original transcript but was excised from the published translation I cite here. I am restoring the text for reasons that should become more apparent in the course of my discussion.
research” he pioneered—had materialized despite enormous skepticism. The “farsighted minority” labored in an underappreciated area but “confidence [was] growing.”

When taken together, these three points might appear to add up to a fairly straightforward account of moral conviction, hard work, and persistence as the principle factors behind the viability of Afro-Cubans studies. However, at the center of Ortiz’s narrative is a reminder that his “field of research” has a tricky history. The whole business pivoted around a particular trick, namely, his introduction of “the expression ‘Afro-Cuban.’” Ortiz acknowledged that, by 1942, the term had “been incorporated into common parlance” despite the fact that in 1906 he had conjured it into existence or, more precisely, had resurrected it from a dead past with another purpose and new life. He had revived ‘Afro-Cuban’ to bypass “designations tainted with prejudice and more exactly defining the dual origin of the social phenomena I had set out to study.”

And what were “the social phenomena” Ortiz endeavored to investigate? As he noted, the focus of his “brief tentative study” had been “the religious and magical survivals of African cultures in Cuba.” In the speech, Ortiz suggested that how he understood “magic” in 1942 had not fundamentally changed since 1906. While it was not “an extravagant variation of the white man’s witchcraft, i.e. the thousand-year-old dealings with demons or evil spirits,” magic was still a materialistic and volitional practice. It hinged upon an act of will in which practitioners used ritual propitiations to generate corresponding effects in the world. In this regard, a curious link surfaces in Ortiz history between the methods and topic of his 1906 book. According to his own characterization, his initial study of magic depended upon it own trick! Had not he given life to ‘Afro-Cuban’ by introducing it in an original way within the ritualistic confines of ethnographic scholarship? Had not he turned to ‘Afro-Cuban’ as
something of a magical formula that would circulate how he intended? And had his trick not worked? By his own description, his original formulation had since 1906 “been incorporated into common parlance.”

2.

Whether or not Ortiz’s 1906 book introduced the term “Afro-Cuban” into popular circulation, his 1942 speech reflects certain truths about the world today. The word “Afro-Cuban” is part of “common parlance” today as in 1942. So too is “Afro-Cuban studies,” the corollary designation for that “field of research” that Ortiz labored so tirelessly to establish. My own account rests on the discursive reality of those terms. To a certain degree, I mimic Ortiz’s 1942 move by tracking the histories of certain terms, beginning with “Afro-Cuban.” My endeavor here could be described as genealogical, but I make no pretense to identify any absolute linguistic origins. I am more concerned with a dynamic of discourse that surfaces in Ortiz’s 1942 reflections. In that regard, the accuracy of his history does not really matter. What concerns me most is Ortiz’s effort to call attention to ‘Afro-Cuban’ as an original “expression.” His historiography turns on the history of his 1906 move and, in that way, is deliberately tricky.

Accordingly, Ortiz’s linguistic innovation moves my discussion from the introduction of the term “Afro-Cuban” to the inauguration of “Afro-Cuban studies.” As it happened, it took three decades for a group of scholars to adopt that designation openly. As Ortiz hinted

3With regard to the contemporary reality of the designations, Tomás Fernández Robaina (2005) offers an important and ironic history in a short essay “The Term Afro-Cuban: A Forgotten Contribution.” He points out that “Afro-Cuban” remains common despite the official rejection of the term in Cuba since the 1960s. As Fernández Robaina points out, the revolutionary ideal of equality among and solidarity between all Cubans theoretically precludes qualifying classifications like “Afro-.”
in his 1942 talk, a “field of research” dedicated to “classification and analysis [of the] intricate jungle of African cultural roots that have sprouted anew in Cuba” had developed sporadically. Only recently had the task coalesced among the “select, conscientious, capable and farsighted minority” that had inspired “growing confidence” in Cuba about “ethnographic research.” Ortiz’s comments referred most directly to the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies. In early 1936 Ortiz proposed the creation of a formal institution for Afro-Cuban studies and finally found a number of his peers—including many of Cuba’s most prominent intellectuals—open to the idea. On June 1, a group gathered in Havana to draw up statutes for a new “Sociedad de Estudios Afro-cubanos”—“Society for Afro-Cuban Studies”—and enthusiastically elected Ortiz as the obvious choice for the Society’s first President. In a formal statement released to the public on December 26 of that same year, the Society—with a membership of about forty-eight—announced its purpose and design. Less than a month later, on January 16 of 1937, “SEAC”—the acronym (Sociedad de Estudios Afro-cubanos) members took to using—held its first official session. Fittingly, the activities revolved around a lecture, or “inaugural address,” by President Ortiz. The events took place at Club Atenas.

So the move from reflection on the introduction of “Afro-Cuban” to the inauguration of “Afro-Cuban studies” creates a striking cut. The scene jumps back nearly six years in time from 1942 to 1937 but hardly changes otherwise. In each case, Fernando Ortiz stands on a tropical winter’s night at a podium in Havana’s Club Atenas. Ortiz’s remarks from the 1937 occasion stand, structurally and thematically, at the center of my account. I come to them at the midpoint of my discussion. But, more fundamentally, his words from that night embody the critical dynamics I hope to illuminate with my study.
What did Ortiz say? The explicit theme of his remarks was “religión en ‘poesía mulata’” [religion in ‘mulatto poetry’]. In introducing the talk, he noted his intention to offer an example of social science that the new Society for Afro-Cuban Studies might use as a model. Therefore, he wanted to show the religious dimensions of—and especially the African religious elements in—a seemingly secular and modernist body of contemporary Caribbean literature known as poesía mulata (‘mulatto poetry’).  

Ortiz’s lecture circled around magic. In order to illuminate the dimensions of African religion in the poems, Ortiz spent much of his talk laying out a characterization of religion in general. This task enabled him to identify the particular “African” religious forms reflected in poesía mulata. He focused especially on “primitive magic,” a particular species within the larger genus of “religion.” In making this point, Ortiz relied on his familiar characterization of magic as a matter of trying to use material means, such as repetition of efficacious words, to generate corresponding effects in the world in a quest to satisfy personal desires.

In assessing “primitive magic,” Ortiz made the moves I have already outlined. He considered magical endeavors dangerously misguided by false notions of cause and effect. However, Ortiz pointed out the critical lesson of poesía mulata. He emphasized that, despite the irrationality of the “primitive” forms of African magic drawn into poesía mulata, the poems forcefully revealed that magical practices should be taken very seriously as expressions of a desire for “liberation” and, more immediately, for intense, liberating collective experiences that created bonds among participants and thus transformed the communities. In this regard, primitive magic forcefully expressed an underlying human

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4 As Ortiz emphasized in his talk, the poems themselves—and not necessarily the poets—were “mulatto.” I return to this idea at a later point in my discussion. Moreover, I will continue to use the untranslated term ‘poesía mulata’ instead of ‘mulatto poetry’ in order to preserve Ortiz’s critical notion that these poems formed a unique body of early-twentieth-century modernist Spanish Caribbean literature.
impulse—“religiosity,” as he called it—that served as the essence of “religion.” In other words, Ortiz highlighted the ‘intoxicating energies’ tied up in magical pursuits.

And in identifying those energies, Ortiz fully intended—to put the matters in Benjamin’s terms—to “win” them for a social revolution. In the last portion of his talk, Ortiz took an openly political turn. He presented his audience with a prophetic vision in which publicly produced and performed “aesthetic theatricalizations” of rites of magic would transform Cuban society—and even the whole of humanity—by generating exhilarating collective experiences that mimicked the original ceremonies. The terms ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ derive, at their roots, around considerations of position in relation to a particular place: “the temple.” Profanum—literally, ‘outside (pro) the temple (fanum)’—contrasts with sacrare—the ‘seat’ of the deities. Ortiz was fully aware of these etymologies, and he envisioned deliberate, and literal, acts of profanation. He dramatized the point by insisting that “sacred rites, Dionysian in nature,” would “emerge into the light of day” from “their crypts,” and he figured this emergence from the temples as a matter of “liberation.”

My entire study builds around that portrayal of profanation at the end of Ortiz’s January 1937 inaugural address. With that image, Ortiz vividly portrayed his quest to produce socially revitalizing ritualistic experiences for Cuba and beyond. He also made clear that he saw the whole affair as a confrontation of magic. The presence of “primitive magic” in the scenario may have been obvious, but Ortiz identified another factor in his equation: “the magic power of money.” Ortiz saw in poesía mulata how “primitive magic” would turn money’s spell against itself, but the intervention would require a third form of magic: the public “theatricalizations,” undertaken knowingly and with revolutionary intentions, that produced desired effects.
3.

In building my discussion around Ortiz’s January 1937 inaugural address, I illuminate the broader relevance of the profane vision that concludes the speech. The movements around magic in the talk reflect the dynamics of a more general Cuban intellectual discourse of displacing magic running across the first half of the twentieth century. I follow the figure of magic as it surfaces at points between the early 1900s and 1956 in Ortiz’s activities and in some of the intellectual production that drew upon, responded to, and influenced them. My point of emphasis is that, as in Ortiz’s speech, the participants in this discourse figure their enterprises as magical practices.

I situate the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies within this frame. The development of Afro-Cuban studies provides a window through which to see how, in its play on magic, the Cuban intellectual discourse in which SEAC arises and participates is a direct reflection of and on modernity. The period of this development encompasses the first decades of a politically independent Cuba. Freed of Spanish colonial control during the War of 1898, the island fell under the official protection of the United States government until 1902. In that year the U.S. transferred the powers of governance to an independently elected administration, and the Cuban Republic suddenly came into official existence. From this standpoint, questions about the nature of Cuban society—what it was, what it should be, how those objectives could be achieved, and so on—assumed practical urgency. In discussing these issues publicly amongst themselves and with outsiders, virtually all Cubans appeared to agree on one point: the legacy of colonialism had hindered Cuba’s development as a “modern” society. Cuba had to modernize.
In the extensive and often contentious public debates over what exactly it meant to “modernize” and how that commonly held objective could be achieved, at least one other apparent point of agreement developed: one of the principal roadblocks to the modernization of Cuban society was the island’s large “colored” population, which consisted largely of former slaves and descendants of slaves. Defined by an overwhelming poverty of material wealth and of formal education within this major sector of Cuba’s population, the so-called “colored” masses figured in the public imagination as the antithesis of the “modern.” What should be done with these people? Could they be educated? Could they be eliminated? Could they be sent somewhere else? Nothing symbolized the group’s threat to modernization more than the perceived propensity among the colored toward magical practices introduced to the island during the centuries of plantation-driven migration by European peasants, African slaves, and Chinese contract-laborers. The need to displace primitive magic surfaced in this context as a common theme in Cuban public discourse. In this regard, Ortiz’s obvious ambivalence in January 1937 toward magic reflected a wider and enduring sentiment about the challenges to modernization.

So too did his invocation of “the magic power of money.” His attack on commodification echoed another familiar refrain in Cuban public discussion during over the first half of the twentieth century. This position revealed the varied but prevalent influence among Cubans of Marxism. Marx’s analysis of the mystifying process of commodification reverberated far and wide on the island. As Ortiz implied in the conclusion of his January

5The abiding influence of Marxism in Cuba throughout the early twentieth century should be fairly obvious in light of the subsequent triumph at the end of this period of the Castro-led Revolutionary Forces. However, as reflected throughout my discussion, claims to and interpretations of Marxism varied widely. For an illuminating consideration of diverse reactions to Marxism in Cuba leading into the 1930s, see Luis Aguilar’s Cuba 1933: Prologue to Revolution (1972), which traces the development of the 1933 overthrow of Machado. I discuss this history more fully in Chapter 2.
1937 talk, modernity’s magic played out as money, which converts everything into an abstract value of exchange. Even though humans to facilitate social interaction had created money, that tool of exchange somehow usurped control and came to govern relations. Vital human contact had been lost in contemporary societies because capitalism—a particular and peculiar version of modernity—had won the day. Under capitalism, all social exchange took place through the mediation of objectified commodities. People and places—including Cubans and Cuba—had turned into commodities and suffered terribly for it. Therefore, modernizing Cuban society meant displacing magic in all of its forms, especially in its desocializing modern guises under the rule of capitalist commodification. This modern magic had to be dislodged in order to fulfill modernity’s liberating potential and to achieve a real, more complete modernization.

But in openly asserting a displacing magic of its own, Ortiz’s January 1937 prophecy reveals that Cuban reflections on modernity and modernization played out according to a thoroughly modern dynamic. By calling attention to its own displacing power, Ortiz and his cohorts participated in a broad modern intellectual tradition that I call “post-Kantian.” With that term, I follow Michel Foucault and many others who invoke Kant as a marker of a profound shift in conceptions of knowledge. As Foucault explains in The Order of Things, at the end of the eighteenth century Kant formally worked out the philosophical framework of a “modern order” in which knowledge reaches its ‘end’ with reason’s reflexive return to its own workings. When Kant came to the conclusion through his three Critiques that rational

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6See especially Chapter 7 (“The Limits of Representation”) in The Order of Things. With the following statement, Foucault summarizes a key point in his “archaeology of the human sciences”:

Confronting ideology, the Kantian critique marks the threshold of our modernity; it questions representation, not in accordance with the endless movement that proceeds from the simple element to all its possible combinations, but on the basis of its rightful limits. Thus it sanctions
pursuits could not make any definitive truth-claims about the external world but only about the mechanisms of reason itself, he paved the way for the quintessentially “modern” notion that humans therefore were capable of rationally constituting their own worlds. Since reason included an “aesthetic” function—that is, the ability to imagine new life forms and to recognize these imaginings as such—humans potentially could change the worlds they inhabit through the power of their own rational productions.

Ever since Kant began to work out his critical system more than two centuries ago, readers have pushed the implications of his claims in myriad directions with competing implications. Frederick C. Beiser summarizes how related yet distinct critical possibilities emerged among Kant’s immediate intellectual successors. In a short, illustrative essay on “Early Romanticism and the Aufklärung,” Beiser traces two of the primary and most influential legacies of post-Kantian thought: Romanticism and Idealism. He shows how these traditions developed among a singular group of friends: the famous “Jena Group,” or self-identified “new sect,” that directly engaged Kant’s critical system in searching for ways to use philosophy and aesthetics—and especially the philosophy of aesthetics—to restore a social fabric that they considered seriously frayed. The group—including Ludwig Tieck, F.W.J. Schelling, Ernst Schleiermacher, Novalis, Friedrich Hölderin (at times), Friedrich Schlegel, and others—regularly met at the house of Schlegel’s brother, August Wilhelm (Beiser 1996: 319). For purposes of illustration and explication, Beiser aligns “Romanticism” with A.W. Schlegel, as ringleader, and identifies its intimate relation to the “Idealist” system represented by G.W.F Hegel, who participated in “the new sect” during its early years at the

for the first time that event in European culture which coincides with the end of the eighteenth century: the withdrawal of knowledge and thought outside the space of representation. That space is brought into question in its foundation, its origins, and its limits: and by this very fact […] now appears as a metaphysics. (Foucault 1970: 242-43)
very end of the eighteenth century. Beiser emphasizes the important differences between these two post-Kantian trajectories of thought, but he also highlights their common grounding in Kant’s notion of aesthetic self-constitution through human reason that imaginatively recreates the world in reflecting on its own operations.

As I demonstrate throughout my study, Ortiz and the other Cuban intellectuals that I discuss operate within that same post-Kantian tradition. Ortiz’s intellectual training occurred within a tradition of “Krauspositivist” social science descended directly from Kantian thought, and the Marxian critique so influential in Cuba also emerged squarely in the post-Kantian tradition. Accordingly, the Cubans often refer directly to earlier thinkers like Hegel and, more fundamentally, struggle with many of the same issues as Kant’s immediate successors. The tensions between the different post-Kantian trajectories play out in the Cubans’ work without necessarily finding resolution. To put it another way, the intellectuals move back and forth between “Romantic” and “Idealist” sensibilities.

The emblem adopted by the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies encapsulates both the post-Kantian and the magical parameters of the organization’s modernist engagements with modernity. In a lengthy explanation published in 1937 in the first volume of the group’s

7Many studies, building on Ortiz’s own characterizations of his intellectual formation, highlight his associations with positivism, especially with the Italian criminological positivism of Enrico Ferri and Cesare Lombroso. However, very few sources consider the more fundamental influence of the Krausism—rearticulated as “Krauspositivism”—within the Spanish intellectual circles of Ortiz’s education. A notable exception is Consuelo Naranjo Orovio and Miguel Angel-Puig Samper Mulero’s “Spanish Intellectuals and Fernando Ortiz (1900-1941)” (2005). German philosopher Frederic Christian Krause (1781-1832) studied in Jena under Hegel and Fichte. His direct engagement with Kant’s work led him to a ‘philosophy of identity’ in which reason unveils all parts of the universe amounting to a divine organism (God). Krause’s ideas gained widespread attention in Spain during the latter half of the nineteenth century through Julian Sanz del Río, who translated Krause’s The Ideal of the Humanity of Life, and through Francisco Giner de los Ríos, founder and director of the influential Instituto Libre de Enseñanza (“Free School of Teaching”).
journal, Ortiz explained the Society’s choice to represent itself through a janus-image taken from “the historic, sixth-century B.C. janiform vase made by the potter Charinus” (Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos 1937: 11). One of the janus’s faces was black while the other was white and, therefore, symbolized “the two great races that constitute the Afro-Cuban ancestry” that the Society had dedicated itself to studying (11). However, “it was also convenient that the symbol had a classical and historical sense to signify more fully the character of the new organization” (11). The “classical and historical sense” of the image referred specifically to ancient traditions of magic since “it is very probable that the bifacial morphology of the vase had a sacred and ritual function of propitiatory [propiciatorio] character” (12). In other words, SEAC wanted to represent itself with a “sacred and ritual” image meant to propitiate magically what it portrayed. Thus, the emblem proclaimed that like the janus-image SEAC directed its own magic at other magical forces coming from opposite directions.

Fittingly, Ortiz referred at one point to SEAC’s emblem as a “cubanismo,” or ‘cubanism.’ In the intellectual discourse under consideration in my discussion, the cubanismo served as the most familiar act of magic. The term most often referred to specific words or phrases but could apply to almost anything, including a whole novel or a particular action. In every case, a cubanismo was an act of creative will. The term applied when Cubans deliberately came up with an original word, move, or artistic production. The essence of the cubanismo was that it was a creation that called attention to its own originality. In doing so, the cubanismo was implicitly irreverent and interventionist. In proclaiming its own originality, the cubanismo exposed the reification of other, more familiar productions that

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8Because of the specific meanings and intentions bound up in the cubanismo within this Cuban intellectual discourse, I will continue to use the original term instead of its obvious translation as ‘cubanism.’
obscured their own fictive origins. The self-consciously impertinent creations stood as ‘cubanisms’ because they ostensibly embodied a tendency to and capacity for creative intervention unique to Cubans.

The magical parameters of the cubanismo, as an act of creative will, surface immediately. This sense of the magic at work only heightens in light of the material practice that characterized the cubanismo. Its originality stemmed from its status as a creative transformation—or displacement—of existing materials. It did not invent whole cloth. The crux of the cubanismo was that it brought together components from elsewhere in a new way. The effect of the cubanismo—the illumination of the fiction at work in itself and in the sources on which it drew—arose by making explicit the unprecedented contact between the various elements. In that regard, SEAC’s emblem serves as a powerful illustration of the cubanismo. The explanation of the symbol highlights that the image itself, with its two different faces, is a composite of forms. In turn, this composition reflects how the cubanismo brings different sources—in this case, a component from a “classical and historical” vase that carries a “sacred and ritual sense”—into a contemporary, scholarly project intended to destabilize familiar images of Cuban society.

Therefore, in purpose and structure, the cubanismo paralleled familiar examples of “primitive” magic. Like a magical formula intended to bring two people together romantically by mixing the spit from one with the fingernail clippings of another, a cubanismo tries to unsettle settled ideas and images by mixing materials. It operates according to the principle of contagion that James Frazer so famously identified in The Golden Bough as the foundation of all forms of magic. It is no accident, then, that Frazer’s
theory of magic as well as specific examples of “primitive” magic frequently surfaces in the
Cuban intellectual discourse that so prominently proclaimed and practiced the cubanismo.⁹

5.

It is in situating the development and activities of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies
within a magical Cuban intellectual discourse on magic that my account comes upon a
pivotal cubanismo. Following the establishment of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies in late
1936, the intellectuals collected in and around the Society tried to initiate wider public
reconsideration of the place of Afro-Cuban traditions—and of Afro-Cubans themselves—
within modern Cuban society. With that objective, the editors of SEAC’s journal received in
1941 a section of a work-in-progress by Rómulo Lachatañeré, a protégée of Ortiz and one of
SEAC’s rising stars. Lachatañeré’s project, sent from New York, created a stir within SEAC.
In the final portion of the manuscript, Lachatañeré unleashed a fierce critique on Ortiz.
Lachatañeré held his mentor—the President of the Society and the recognized founder of
Afro-Cuban studies as a field of social scientific inquiry—personally responsible for creating
dangerously misguided stereotypes of Afro-Cubans. According to Lachatañeré, Ortiz’s
pioneering and influential work from the first decade of the twentieth century introduced and
reinforced “the false term ‘brujería’” as a blanket description for Afro-Cuban traditions. The
word figured all Afro-Cuban ideas and practices as “fetishistic” witchcraft or sorcery, that is,
as a dangerous species of “magic” rooted in anti-social, criminal impulses. Lachatañeré

⁹For extensive and illuminating analysis of the cubanismo and of particular examples, see the work of
Gustavo Pérez-Firmat (e.g. Pérez-Firmat 1989). Pérez-Firmat unabashedly frames his own studies of
cubanismos as ‘new cubanismos.’ In a future project, I plan a fuller discussion of Pérez-Firmat’s work as part
of a contemporary intellectual discourse that aims to perpetuate ‘displacing magic’ through the production of
‘nuevo cubanismos,’ or ‘new cubanismos.’
implied Ortiz had done nothing to discredit this idea. Building on the historical and ethnographic research outlined in the rest of his manuscript, Lachatañeré argued that a single term—especially an implicitly pejorative one like ‘brujería’—could not represent the diversity of Afro-Cuban traditions. In fact, most Afro-Cuban traditions were not “magic” at all. They were “legitimate religions” and warranted description as such. Lachatañeré proposed his own term, “santería,” as a viable alternative.

Worried about the implications of an article so openly critical of the Society’s own President, the editors of Estudios afrocubanos asked for Ortiz’s response. In his reply, Ortiz took no offense to his student’s criticism and instead offered immediate and enthusiastic acceptance of ‘santería,’ Lachatañeré’s proposed term, as a “legitimate and well-formed cubanismo” to replace the vocabulary of ‘brujeña’ that Ortiz himself had introduced. Ortiz celebrated Lachatañeré’s move because, as a “cubanismo,” it exploded reified notions of “religion” and “magic” with much-needed and typically Cuban creative intervention.

The latter section of my study explores this mediated 1939 exchange in Estudios Afrocubanos between Lachatañeré and Ortiz. I examine the texts in detail because, taken individually as well as a group, they reveal the critical dynamic of the intellectual discourse in which they surface. More specifically, the texts work on and as displacing magic. In each case, the writers identify a socially unsettling sphere of “primitive” magic that they hope to defuse by circumscribing it with new categorical distinctions. Significantly, these theoretical discussions of religion and magic figure themselves, according to their own terms, as “magical” acts, that is, as public performances in which the conjuring of specific words—particular cubanismos—produces material effects to counteract other spells. In his piece, Lachatañeré characterizes ‘brujería’ in magical terms: once articulated, the term took hold
and shaped Cuban society in very real ways. In his response, Ortiz does not disavow Lachatañeré’s characterization. He discloses how in fact he did conjure ‘brujería’ into existence, with profound material consequences. However, Ortiz defended himself on the grounds that the effects were not necessarily those that he intended.

Ortiz’s reflections on the consequential impact of ‘brujería’ are extremely ironic. In the 1939 exchange, Ortiz tries to account for the unforeseen effects of his formulation at the precise moment that Lachatañeré, while taking his mentor to task for his magical endeavors, lets loose his own spell. We only have to look on the shelves of almost any bookstore or library, where references to ‘Santería’ abound, or to see the thousands of hits we get when we type ‘santería’ into an online search engine for definitive evidence of the entrenched reality in our world of Lachatañeré’s cubanismo. In this way, the 1939 texts—like the materialization of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies decades after Ortiz’s call for that type of scholarly organization—force us to reflect upon the peculiar yet acutely real magic at work in the early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse on magic.

Yet, if the emergence of Santeria as a global presence in the decades since Lachatañeré first offered his cubanismo suggests a viable magic at work, that same history also reminds us that all of this working with magic is tricky business. The fact is that Santeria today does not coincide exactly with Lachatañeré’s idea. With his original formulation, Lachatañeré wanted to introduce a technical term that distinguished a particular Afro-Cuban “religion” from other traditions and practices. He emphasized that Afro-Cuban “magic” existed in other forms separate from “santería.” However, a quick review of the first few
pages of search-engine hits demonstrates that Lachatañeré’s cubanismo now carries many different meanings, including associations with the kind of magic that Lachatañeré explicitly distinguished from “santería.” In other words, santería spiraled out of Lachatañeré’s control somewhere along the way in the same manner that ‘brujería,’ another of Ortiz’s cubanismos, took on a life of its own. Similarly, “Afro-Cuban” and “Afro-Cuban studies” moved in directions Ortiz did not foresee. So, even if all of those cubanismos had magical effects, the Cuban intellectual discourse of displacing magic has generated a displaced magic. Its productions have gone off course.

7.

Clearly, my account of the development of Afro-Cuban studies during the late 1930s tries to connect early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual activities to the wider dynamics of modern discourse. But what kind of account can adequately convey the complex movements of a discourse of displacing magic? First, my study inevitably must be selective. In exploring the foundations of Afro-Cuban studies, my discussion may seem to contain some notable omissions. As I have already suggested, instead of aiming for comprehensiveness I

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Lydia Cabrera stands as glaring absence in my discussion. Cabrera’s foundational role in Afro-Cuban studies cannot be underestimated. Her first book, Cuentos negros de Cuba [Black Stories of Cuba], first appeared in 1937 (in French by a Parisian publisher) and thus falls directly within the late-1930s time period on which I focus. She was a founding member of the Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos as well as an active participant in many of the intellectual endeavors to which I refer. Fernando Ortiz, who was her brother-in-law, encouraged Cabrera’s ethnographic pursuits and contributed enthusiastic prefatory remarks to the original Spanish edition of Cuentos negros (see Cabrera 1940). Similarly, Cabrera’s El monte, released in 1954, falls at the tail end of the period I consider. Arguably, El monte remains the most widely read and influential account to date of Afro-Cuban practices. As practitioners around the world readily admit, they often use the book as a reference guide. (The 1975 Ediciones Universales version of El monte (Cabrera 1975) is the standard edition available in the U.S. Due to the unabated interest in Cabrera’s work in Cuba, a state publishing house, Letras Cubanas, finally released the book in 1993 despite Cabrera’s official status on the island as an exile and traitor to the Revolution.) See also Edna Rodríguez-Mangual’s recent study (Rodríguez-Mangual 2004), which ably situates Cabrera’s life and work—as well as Afro-Cuban studies more generally—in the wider context of twentieth-century debates about Cuban identity. I originally planned to include discussion of Cabrera and her
focus on cases that I consider both foundational to and exemplary of developments in Cuban intellectual discourse between the early 1930s and mid-1950s.

Thus, *Displacing Magic* is necessarily circuitous. My study jumps back and forth and from side to side in an attempt to illuminate more fully through mimesis the peculiar workings of modernity. I am primarily concerned with historical developments related to Cuba between 1902 and 1956, but my account does not follow a straight chronological line and definitely does not stay in one place. As I have already indicated, Ortiz’s concluding remarks at the January 1937 inauguration in Havana of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies have already set the account in motion and then reappear as a touchstone throughout a discussion that moves backward, forwards, and laterally along a network of discursive lines passing through that historical and geographical spot. The circuitous movements of my account are part of my argument. *Displacing Magic* cannot simply portray a discourse circuit; my study necessarily moves *within* its own intellectual network. My study draws on and contributes to different scholarly fields, including religious studies and Latin American cultural studies. At the same time, *Displacing Magic* also functions as a transmission point where these scholarly fields come into contact in new, potentially effective ways.

As a dissertation written within a department of religious studies, my study most immediately engages that discipline. *Displacing Magic* connects with a growing field of historical scholarship on discourses on religion and magic.11 Within the burgeoning body of foundational texts in the present study. I have decided to leave those considerations for a separate project. My reasons for doing so are both pragmatic and historical: adequate discussion of Cabrera’s work demands time and space not practically available here; at the same time, Cabrera did not actively engage in the theoretical considerations of “magic” and “religion” that serve as the focus of my present discussion.

11This body of scholarship includes but certainly extends beyond the following examples: the pioneering work of Jonathan Z. Smith (e.g. 1982, 1998); William Pietz’s genealogy of ‘fetish’ and ‘fetishism’ (1988, 1987, 1988); explorations in and of ethnographies of magic by Michael Taussig (e.g. 1980, 1992, 1997);
literature, Randall Styer’s work—especially his recent *Making Magic*—operates as an immediate point of articulation, ever-present though largely unidentified, in the circuit of discourse my discussion establishes. In *Making Magic* Styers presents a variety of scholarly theories on and invocations of magic since the late nineteenth century. In this review, he shows how the modern discourse on magic is magical according to its own terms. As Styers emphasizes, this paradox especially illuminates the parameters of modernity itself. “Perhaps the most significant subtext that will emerge from these theories,” he explains in setting up his review of the discourse on magic, “is the scholarly effort to conjure—or conjure away—what it means to be modern. Debates over magic provide an extraordinarily rich ground for exploring the nature of modernity, its values, and its limits” (2003: 4). Clearly, my own project follows Styers’ lead and lends additional support to his argument. I situate early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse as one of the “debates over magic” in which contributors’ particular attempts to make sense of modernity offer “provide extraordinarily rich ground” for our own wider explorations of “the nature of modernity, its values, and its limits.”

Still, the narrower scope of my study enables me to extend Styers’ project—and, I insist, the historical scholarship on discourses of religion and magic more broadly—beyond current limits. Styers openly acknowledges the boundaries of his project and welcomes its development. He notes that, “for both practical and theoretical reasons,” his study focuses mostly on English-language examples of “the ‘anthropology of religion’” within the “Western scholarly literature” of nineteenth- and twentieth-century “religious studies and social sciences” (22-3). “These limitations serve only the interest of space,” he admits. “It is

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Godzich 1987; Stocking 1992; Asad 1993; Masuzawa 1993; Benavides 1997; McCutcheon 1997; Molendijk and Pels 1998; Peterson and Walhof 2002; Dubuisson 2003.
important to recognize that modern discourse on magic is as polymorphous and boundless as the phenomenon it purports to describe” (22).

It is not a criticism of Styers’ work to point out that the move beyond the boundaries of his project necessarily complicates his main argument. He needs considerable critical acumen to show the magic in the body of literature on which he focuses because, as he highlights, those “scholarly texts on magic have exerted potent forms of surreptitious—and often mystifying—power” (3). I need considerably less analytical prowess to make a parallel claim about the field of discourse under consideration here. The power play, the magic, at work in the Cuban sources is not surreptitious at all. As I have already suggested and as I highlight throughout my discussion, the Cuban intellectuals continually call attention to the magic of their knowledge-production. That open will-to-power is exactly the point. And, from that angle, Styers may be all the more on the mark. Perhaps the self-reflexivity of the discourse of displacing magic makes it all the more surreptitious, mystifying, and potent. So, as I proceed, I consider the potency—and potential impotency—of a demystifying discourse that constantly proclaims its own furtiveness.

In any case, one of my objectives with *Displacing Magic* is to transmit Latin Americanist critical perspectives more directly into religious studies. In that regard, Latin American cultural studies offers one immediate and important contribution to the “Western”-centered scholarship on discourses of religion and magic. For decades, observers of Latin American intellectual production have highlighted its characteristic reflexivity with regard to modernity: Latin American intellectuals frequently use modern discourses of knowledge to reflect openly upon the limits of modernity. The corollary of this observation is that this “double-consciousness”—that awareness of standing simultaneously inside and outside of
modernity—is itself typically modern. It is a species of post-Kantianism enabled by and peculiar to “the Modern Order.”

Since I build on this critical point as it plays out in Roberto González Echevarría’s influential studies of Alejo Carpentier, I will invoke his scholarship as a specific example of Latin Americanist scholarship that could contribute significantly to the development in religious studies of wider histories of discourse on religion and magic. At the same time, González Echevarría’s work also serves as a reminder that the circuits of scholarship pass back and forth. Just as Latin American cultural studies can enrich religious studies, so too can the latter widen the perspectives of the former. González Echevarría often utilizes categories from religious studies in order to illuminate the dynamics of Latin American cultural production. For instance, he considers the relation of “magic” to Carpentier’s 1948 prologue, and in one of his most influential studies, *Myth and Archive* (1998), he explores the mythic components of Latin American narrative more generally. In doing so, González Echevarría challenges established modern categories that imply clear separation of genres like “fiction,” “myth,” “law,” “ethnography,” and so on. However, in drawing on categories of religion to contest reified literary boundaries, González Echevarría generally relies unquestioningly on reified terms from the modern anthropology of religion. In other words, he does not subject the social scientific discourse on religion and magic to the kind of rigorous historical analysis he wants to bring to modern knowledge-production on literature. González Echevarría is far from alone among Latin Americanist cultural critics in this regard. A more powerful circuit between his primary areas of study and histories of discourse on religion and magic could energize each field of scholarship in that network.
Still, González Echevarría offers a point of entry into these interlocking circuits of modern discourse. González Echevarría suggests that in 1948 Alejo Carpentier already made the point that, decades later, contemporary Latin Americanist cultural criticism hammers home. According to González Echevarría, the prologue to *The Kingdom of This World* unsettles accepted categories of modern cultural production in order to call modernity itself into question. Is it possible then that Carpentier’s text, with its “double-consciousness” of modernity, also tried to displace familiar notions of magic? This question carries me to Paris and Surrealism and then back again to Carpentier’s text, to Afro-Cuban studies, and its place in a Cuban discourse of displacing magic.
Your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched.

Theodor Adorno, to Walter Benjamin (1938)

But what many forget, in disguising themselves as cheap magicians, is that the marvelous becomes unequivocally marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (a miracle), a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed or singularly favorable illumination of the previously unremarked riches of reality, an amplification of the measures and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity due to an exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of ‘limit state.’

Alejo Carpentier (1949)

1.

In November of 1938, Theodor Adorno sent a letter to his friend Walter Benjamin with commentaries on a draft of a study called “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.” In submitting the pages to Adorno, Benjamin had indicated his conception of them as a pivotal and exemplary section of the self-described “Arcades Project” on which he had been working for nearly a decade. As Benjamin had explained to Adorno on many occasions, the Arcades Project circled around the notion of Paris’s nineteenth-century shopping arcades as emblematic of what Marx (in one of his own letters to a friend) had called the city’s emergence as “the new capital of the new world.”¹² Benjamin had completed an initial exposé of the project in the spring of 1935 called “Paris, the Capital of the

¹²Marx’s comment surfaces in an 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge (Marx and Engels 1978: 12).
Nineteenth Century.” With the title, Benjamin made explicit his effort to engage Marx and Marxism. Benjamin indicated his immediate intention to turn Marx’s thought back on itself: the Arcades Project would follow a Marxian tack in an attempt to situate Marx’s work and the development of Marxism during the mid-nineteenth-century consolidation of industrial capitalism. In using Marx’s work to spiral back on the development of Marxism, Benjamin wanted to release the tradition from what he considered its reliance on a simple-minded economic credo of ‘material-base-causes-superstructure.’ He explained his hope to identify the non-rational components—especially the roles of sense and desire—that enabled capitalism and its continued expansion.

On a number of occasions, Benjamin had admitted to Adorno and other interlocutors that, in searching for a new approach to the non-rational contours of capitalism, his project built directly but ambivalently on André Breton’s Surrealism.13 Even before taking up residence in Paris in 1929 and moving tangentially through Surrealist circles, Benjamin had shown an interest in Breton’s pronounced “modern materialism,” a deliberate effort to build on Engel’s critique of “mechanical materialism,” and in the Surrealists’ attempts to enact that theory as revolutionary practice.14 Once in Paris, Benjamin quickly recognized the decisive influence of Surrealism on and points of critical divergence from his own thinking. In an

13 See, for instance, Benjamin’s November 1928 letter to Gershom Scholem: “In order to lift [the Passagen-Werk] out of an all too ostentatious proximity to the mouvement surréaliste that could become fatal to me, as nature and well-founded as it is, I have to expand it more and more in my mind….” (Walter Benjamin, Briefe, I, 483; as cited in Cohen 1993: 7).

14 Breton cites Engels and coins “modern materialism” in his 1927 “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” (Breton 1969: 141). In his notes on the epistemological and methodological foundations of the Arcades Project (contained in his famous file marked as “Konvolut N”), Benjamin’s cites Breton’s 1935 Political Position of Surrealism): “I can’t stress enough that, for an enlightened materialist like Lafargue, economic determinism is not ‘the absolutely perfect instrument’ that ‘might become the key to all the problems of history.’” Benjamin’s emphasis on this citation attests to his continued interest in Breton’s “modern materialist” revision of the Marxian base-superstructure problematic. See Cohen 1993: 4 for further source information on and discussion of Benjamin’s citation of Breton.
essay produced during his first year in Paris, Benjamin explored the promise as well as the limits of the kind of “modern materialism” posited by Breton. In “Surrealism—The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” Benjamin emphasized that the Surrealists’ pivotal contribution derived from their tireless quest to critique from the inside out the modern rationalism from which capitalism derives and on which it depends. The Surrealists pressed ‘theory’—the ostensible domain of and fulfillment of reason—toward the service of non-rational experiences that would unsettle the rationalist “mystifications” that grounded modern capitalism. In his first Manifesto (1924), Breton figured “the marvelous” (le merveilleux) as the alternative domain in which the irrational elements of social reality appeared. Surrealist pursuits focused on the delineation of and encounter with “marvelous” as means to transform unjust capitalist society. Benjamin summarized the Surrealist Group’s objectives in its quest for le merveilleux: “To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution—this is the project about which Surrealism circles in all of its books and enterprises,” (1978: 189).

Upon reading Benjamin’s 1935 Arcades Project exposé, Adorno immediately recognized his friend’s attempt to bring revolutionary “energies of intoxication” to Marxian theory despite Benjamin’s identification of the limits of the Surrealists’ “enterprises.” In an August 1935 letter to Benjamin, Adorno expressed his uneasiness with the exposé’s mimicry of the Surrealist project. He was particularly troubled by Benjamin’s use, like the Surrealists, of Freudian notions of the unconscious and dreams. The exposé suggested that collective desires surfaced through an epoch’s material goods, which functioned as “wish-images” akin to unconscious expression of desires through dreams. Benjamin proposed that the cultural critic could properly mobilize images of those products to create “dialectical images” with
the socially transforming power to “awaken the world from the dream of itself.” 15 In response, Adorno expressed his opinion that “the theory of the dialectical image” was fundamentally “undialectical.” With the notion of “wish-images,” Adorno opined, Benjamin relied on capitalism’s effects—that is, a key part of its problem—as the means to a solution. According to Adorno, what Benjamin needed was a return to Marx’s theory of how a society’s “dreams” manifested the ideology that empowered the ruling class.

Thus, three years later Adorno read “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”—a foundational part of Benjamin’s Arcades Project—with considerable disappointment. Adorno did not mince his words in commenting on Benjamin’s draft. Adorno expressed his opinion that the theoretical limitations of the 1935 exposé had only worsened. As far as Adorno could tell, Benjamin had retreated too far toward a vulgar materialism by implying that economic circumstances directly and easily explained Baudelaire’s poetry. In any case, Benjamin did not say. He offered no theoretical grounding for reading his study. “Unless I am very much mistaken,” Adorno proposed, “your dialectic lacks one thing: mediation. Throughout your text there is a tendency to relate the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire’s work directly to adjacent features in the social history of his time, preferably economic features” (Taylor 1980: 128). After a couple of pages of examples and conjectures, Adorno summed up his view of the problem:

The ‘mediation’ which I miss, and find obscured by materialistic-historiographic invocation, is nothing other than the theory which your study omits […] If one wished to put it drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell (131).

15 Benjamin here cited again from Marx’s 1843 letter to Ruge. See Cohen 1993: 21f for further discussion of these quotations and of Adorno’s November 1935 reply to Benjamin’s exposé.
Since Adorno first offered this opinion—and especially in recent decades as interest in Benjamin’s work has grown exponentially—third-party observers have weighed in on the accuracy of the assessment. Many critics have agreed with Adorno’s own admission that he may have missed the theoretical implications of Benjamin’s lack of explicit theory.\(^{16}\) Benjamin intimated as much in responding to Adorno. He explained the implicitly theory in his juxtaposition of Baudelaire’s work with information about the period. His intention had been to illuminate how Baudelaire’s images operated as part of the material structure of nineteenth-century Paris instead of as a simple reflection of that “base.” What Benjamin did not admit to Adorno was that, in its form and objectives, the Baudelaire study continued to pursue the Surrealist enterprise “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution.” Benjamin hoped that, more than support a theory, his project would generate a socially transforming experience akin to the collective “awakening” he imagined possible through “dialectical images.”

And, in that regard, the value of Adorno’s comments on Benjamin’s 1938 Baudelaire study derives from the very terms in which he casts the purported problem. Is it accidental that Adorno figures “magic” and “positivism” as contiguous domains that converge at some “bewitched” junction? Why does he suppose that only “theory” stave off the dangerous “spell” of magico-positivist contagion enacted in Benjamin’s “materialistic-historiographic invocation”? Whether intentionally or not, Adorno echoes a conception of “magic” that Benjamin uses in the Baudelaire study. Like Adorno, Benjamin uses “magic” as an image of a “spot that is bewitched” by the obfuscation of the causality behind material production. “Baudelaire does not say farewell to the city without invoking its barricades,” Benjamin

\(^{16}\)Jurgen Habermas is a notable exception. In an essay on Benjamin, Habermas argues that Adorno was on the mark about his friend’s flight from Marx’s thought into “theology” (Habermas 1988: 26).
wrote. “He remembers ‘its magic cobblestones which rise up to form fortresses.’ These stones, to be sure, are ‘magic’ because Baudelaire’s poem says nothing about the hands that set them in motion” (Benjamin 1973: 15).

On one level, Benjamin’s highlights the “magic cobblestones” as a way to point to Baudelaire’s Marxian awareness of the nature of labor under capitalism, where the identity of the worker disappears from the commodity he or she works to produce. On another level, Benjamin’s play on magic also recalls the Surrealist notion of “the marvelous,” where familiar material entities suddenly produce an unsettling, non-rational sensation that carries transformative potential. In citing the images of the city’s “magic cobblestones,” Benjamin followed the Surrealists as well as Baudelaire in positing the eruption of other registers of “reality”—those outside of the grasp of or repressed by modern rationality—at specific material sites. For Baudelaire, Breton, and Benjamin alike, the image-sphere offered a privileged material space where such intrusions might reveal themselves and where they might also be deliberately invoked. The figure of magic embodied all of those double movements of mystification and demystification, of capitalism and its others, of familiar and unfamiliar registers of reality.

So, whether or not Adorno agreed with the method, he correctly identified the nexus of terms at play in Benjamin’s Surrealist-influenced project: “magic” marked the place where positivism could break another “spell”—that of “theory” itself—by effacing rationalist mediation in order to expose its usual self-effacement, its own tricky “magic.” Adorno’s criticism, by locating a “bewitched spot” where magic appears, isolates fundamental epistemological issues raised by Surrealist pursuits of the marvelous and by Benjamin’s reformulation of that project: What is the relationship between representation and reality?
What is the role of the image-maker in that relationship? How are images and image-makers implicated in material production?

2.

Still, if Adorno’s (mis)reading of Benjamin locates images “at the crossroads of magic and positivism,” is there necessarily only one “bewitched spot”? In the rest of this chapter, I pursue that question by exploring a 1949 text in which Alejo Carpentier enacts his own critical engagement with the Surrealist legacy. The effort represents another attempt to unsettle the enchantments of modern rationalism with a species of magical positivism. Significantly, a related term—‘magical realism’—has since attached itself to Carpentier’s text. By the mid-1960s, Carpentier’s essay had achieved popular recognition as the initial manifesto for magical realist aesthetics, now one of Latin America’s most familiar cultural exports.

While the phrase ‘magical realism’ has circulated so widely in recent decades as to lose most of its descriptive specificity, Carpentier’s 1949 text gave shape to the most familiar formulations of the term with regard to Latin American intellectual production.17 In the ongoing discussions about the term among cultural critics since the 1960s, a general consensus holds that ‘magical realism’ refers to aesthetic production that attempts to account for the social simultaneity of radically different epistemologies. The ‘magical realist’ work presents divergent worldviews alongside each other—such as indigenous creation myths that

17See the introduction to Zamora 1995 for a history of ‘magical realism’ as well as for an example of the summary formulation I describe in the following paragraph. Sangari 1987 also represents what I call “a general consensus” about the sytistics of “magical realism.” James Clifford’s famous essay, “On Ethnographic Surrealism” (included in Clifford 1988), directly connects magical realism to Surrealist pursuits of the 1930s. I explore this important link in the next chapter, when I examine in more detail Carpentier’s relation to Surrealism. Chanady 1985 offers a well-known alternative perspective on the history and aesthetics of “magical realism” as does, in a different context, Taussig 1980.
encounter modern astronomy—without trying to explain or privilege any of them. The ‘realism’ of the method ostensibly derives from its accurate representation of societies like those of Latin America, where widely different logics still co-exist as a result of cultural heterogeneity. In other words, the style stands as a form of positivism, presenting societies in all of their complexity. ‘Magic’ supposedly adheres to this positivistic method because it necessarily creates the effect of unsettling an audience’s dependence on a modern rationalism that needs to make sense on its own limited terms of unfamiliar forms of logic (including ‘magic’ itself). Thus, according to the critical consensus, effective ‘magical realist’ production seeks to generate socially transforming experience by liberating rationalism from its own limitations and opening it up to alternate structures of knowledge.

Indeed, Carpentier’s 1949 text sets down that familiar ‘magical realist’ position. He calls on image-makers to develop “chronicles” of the world. He argues that, instead of inventing fictions whole cloth, artists should present natural, historical, and social facts without theoretical intrusion so that entities can speak for themselves. In Adorno’s terms, Carpentier imagines “materialistic-historiographic invocation” as a means to revelation of realities that unsettle modern rationalism. In that regard, Carpentier’s text directly takes up the Surrealist effort “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution.” Like Benjamin and the Surrealists, Carpentier posits positivist representation as a path toward experience, that is, as the source of unforeseen “illuminations” that have the potential to transform society. And, also like Benjamin, Carpentier associates effective images, including his own text, with magic. Accordingly, we could say that his 1949 essay rightfully occupies its privileged place as a reformulation of Surrealist ‘magical positivism’ into Latin American ‘magical realism.’
However, such an assessment is fraught with irony. Most immediately, Carpentier stakes out his position by explicitly distancing himself from and harshly criticizing Surrealism. In doing so, he locates the “marvelous” sought by the Surrealists as part of the exclusive domain of the Americas and of Americans. In other words, Carpentier refigures Adorno’s “bewitched” place as a literal—that is, geographic—spot that lies at enchanted American “crossroads.” With his essay, Carpentier attempts to wrestle “the marvelous” away from the Surrealist legacy in particular and from Europe in general and to lay a claim to the American revelation of socially transforming realities. More specifically, Carpentier pursues a critique of modernity in order to lay the foundations for an openly Americanist politics of culture.

But, in order to carry out these gestures, Carpentier resorts to mimicry. In searching for the limits of modernity, he plays a modernist game that he links to contemporary European intellectual movements. Carpentier’s essay calls attention to its own tricks in a way that exposes modernity’s contradictions. Therefore, Carpentier’s essay asserts regional difference through the kind reflection on reflection that characterizes modern Latin American intellectual production. And, as I underscore, the mimicry of Carpentier’s project becomes especially apparent through magic. What enables Carpentier to put forth his Americanist claim is the same elusiveness in the figure of magic that Benjamin plays off in situating his project—as well as Marx and Baudelaire’s critiques—in and against modernity.

3.

The original version of Carpentier’s famous 1949 essay first appeared on April 8, 1948 in the Venezuelan daily, El Nacional. Carpentier had moved to Caracas in 1945 to work
in Publicidad Ars, an advertising firm founded by his friend Carlos Frías. Between 1947 and 1948 and again between 1951 and 1959, Carpentier held a regular column in *El Nacional* as a cultural critic.\(^\text{18}\) At the time of the essay’s original publication, Carpentier was also finishing a work of historical fiction. When that book was published in Mexico in 1949 as *El reino de este mundo* [The Kingdom of This World], a slightly revised version of the April 1948 essay appeared as the novel’s “prologue.”

Carpentier’s essay attempts—with the paradoxical gestures I summarized above—to theorize away theoretical reflexivity in the name of the kind of ‘magical positivism’ dismissively marked by Adorno. In the piece, Carpentier never explicitly defines “magic” and deliberately reinforces the concept’s ambiguity. In fact, his uses of the term divide magic into two distinct spheres, and it is that process of rupture that characterizes Carpentier’s mode of operation in the essay. In dividing key terms, he struggles to keep the parts separate. His conceptual and linguistic divisions serve as a way to rupture and reconfigure modernity by tearing apart its language in order to reconstruct it. His method is one of exploding some of modernity’s essential binary terms by first bifurcating each of the dualities.

Carpentier immediately sets out on his project of differentiation by situating his discussion at a particular place and time. “At the end of 1943,” the essay begins,

I had the good fortune to visit the kingdom of Henri Christophe—the ruins, so poetic, of Sans Souci; the imposing bulk of the Citadel of La Ferrière, intact in spite of thunderbolts and earthquakes—and to discover Ciudad del Cabo, still Norman to this day—the Cap Français of the former colony—where a street of

\(^{18}\)The 1947-1948 column was entitled “Visión de América” [Vision of America]; from 1951 to 1959, the newspaper used the heading “Letra y Solfá” [Letter and Syllable].
very long balconies leads to a stone palace once occupied by Pauline Bonaparte. (ix; ¶1) \(^{19}\)

Carpentier’s invocation of Haiti, figured in his recollection and his text through “poetic” but decaying traces of the country’s past, is his first shot across modernity’s bow. His reference to “the kingdom of Henri Christophe” serves as his reminder that any history or conception of modernity’s formation must center on the Americas and on the Caribbean in particular. Columbus first landed in that theater, and the islands served as the staging ground for the continual circulation of raw materials, manufactured goods, people free and enslaved, ideas, creatures, plants, and habits that enabled European colonial economies. And, as Carpentier’s images recalls, the world’s largest self-contained plantation economy—the French colony of Saint-Domingue—became beginning in 1791 the site of the first, most dramatic, and singularly successful uprising of slaves and descendents of slaves against their oppressors since the emergence of that global colonial system. In other words, Carpentier’s reference to Henri Christophe, the first ruler of an independent Haiti, recalls the Caribbean as site and sign of perpetual cycles of violence—the brutal oppression and fierce resistance—that underlies any claim to “modernity.” For Carpentier, Haiti’s “ruins, so poetic,” embody the powerful contradiction of the modern legacy: how its promises of liberty and progress have played out in oppression and revolution; how the crumbling material remnants born of those realities also testify, as ‘poems’ of modernity’s failures, to its potential fulfillment.

Where could Carpentier find a better place from which to develop a vision for the realization of modernity’s promises than on the ground of those “ruins, so poetic”? The

*Kingdom of This World* stands as an explicit territorial claim by Carpentier in his quest to

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\(^{19}\)My citations of Carpentier’s essay include two references. The first indicates the page number of the original Spanish (as published in Carpentier 1964). The second part of the parenthetical citation identifies the paragraph number of the English translation included here as Appendix A.
redeem modernity. As Carpentier explains in the last paragraph of the prologue, the novel recounts “a sequence of extraordinary happenings which took place on the island of Santo Domingo, in the space of a period which does not equal the span of a man’s life” (xv; ¶5). Carpentier offers *The Kingdom of This World* as an explicit engagement with modernity: by narrativizing one of its most “extraordinary happenings” in fantastic detail, he sees a path by which to convert that history of failures into a recovery operation. And, more specifically, his historical redemption will reveal the Americas as the source of a new social order, that is, as the Promised Land Europeans always imagined ‘the New World’ to be.

Carpentier’s objective in the prologue is to identify the contours of his critical task and how his text sets the redemptive project in motion. In light of his initial invocation of the elegiac remains of Haiti’s revolutionary era, Carpentier recalls his sudden realization in 1943 of the underlying futility of contemporary European-derived artistic trends:

> Having felt the indisputable charm of the Haitian landscape, having found magical portents in the red roads of the Central Plateau, and heard the drums of the Voodoo gods Petro and Rada, I was moved to compare the marvelous reality I had recently experienced with that exhausting attempt to invoke the marvelous which has characterized certain European literatures of the last thirty years. (ix; ¶1)

Carpentier’s statement marks a second shot at modernity, but with this salvo he obviously has a particular—and somewhat surprising—entity in his sights. His references indicate that the brunt of his attack is directed toward the legacy of André Breton’s Surrealist Group. Carpentier, born of French parents and a resident of Paris between 1928 and 1939, had been actively involved in and sympathetic to the Surrealists’ marvelous pursuits during his years in France.\(^{20}\) Regardless of his personal affinities with Surrealism, Carpentier attacks an intellectual camp that would seem to be among his closest allies in the critique of

\(^{20}\)I address Carpentier’s shifting relations to Surrealism in the next chapter.
modernity and its legacy of rationalism. Surrealism would appear to be a form of artistic modernism that, like Carpentier, sought to critique modernity in order to bring its promise to fruition.

However, Carpentier mimics Surrealism in critiquing it. He invokes another “reality” that splits the “marvelous” into opposing domains. Carpentier eventually calls out Surrealism by name as he outlines the familiar register of “the marvelous” pursued tirelessly in contemporary European literature:

The marvelous, pursued in old prints of the forest of Brocelianda, of the knights of the Round Table, the wizard Merlin and the Arthurian cycle. The marvelous, pathetically evoked in the skills and deformities of fairground characters—will the young French poets never tire of the freaks and clowns of the circus, to which Rimbaud had already bade farewell in his Alchimie du verbe? The marvelous, produced by means of conjuring tricks, bringing together objects which would normally never meet: the old and fraudulent story of the chance encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on an operating table, which spawned the ermine spoons, snails in a rainy taxi, and the lion’s head in a widow’s pelvis of the Surrealist exhibitions. (ix-x; ¶1)

Throughout his discussion, Carpentier intensifies his attack on the “exhausting” strategies unleashed by Surrealism in preceding decades. However, his initial assault on Surrealism makes clear that he targets the means, not the ends, of that apparently hollow quest. By splitting “the marvelous” into two registers, he leaves part of it intact and hones in on “the marvelous” that is “pathetically evoked” and “produced by means of conjuring tricks.” Carpentier sharpens this point, underscoring how, “determined to invoke the marvelous at any cost, the miracle workers turn into bureaucrats[,...]alling on timeworn formulae which reduce certain painting to a predictable jumble of drooping timepieces, dressmakers’ dummies, and vague phallic monuments.” All of these efforts, Carpentier summarizes, disclose the “imaginative poverty” of the miracle-workers-turned-bureaucrats for whom the invocation of the marvelous only “consists in learning codes by heart” (x; ¶2).
His attack on aspirations of “certain European literature of the past thirty years” leads Carpentier to the turning point in his discussion where he begins to mark off that other register of “the marvelous” that he sensed on his 1943 Haitian tour:

What many forget, in disguising themselves as cheap magicians, is that the marvelous becomes unequivocally marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (a miracle), a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed or singularly favorable illumination of the previously unremarked riches of reality, an amplification of the measures and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity due to an exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of ‘limit state’. (xi; ¶2)

The main task of Carpentier’s prologue is to parse out the implications of this passage. His discussion circles around a conception of “reality,” and in these lines he sets down in the broadest terms the means to and effects of “a privileged revelation” of that actuality. The methods involve some kind of “unaccustomed or singularly favorable illumination” that result in “an exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of ‘limit state.’” At different points in the essay, and especially in its last section, Carpentier more fully considers these means and ends.

But, more immediately, he explicates another fissure, which stands as the division that structures his entire discussion. After all, what really separates “the marvelous” pursued by Surrealism from “the marvelous reality” evident to Carpentier in Haiti? In the end, what is it exactly that enables the “miracle” in which that other, hollow version “becomes unequivocally marvelous” and raises “the spirit […] to a kind of ‘limit state’”? Carpentier’s distinction between marvelous forms brings him to the root of the problem. “First of all, the sense of the marvelous presupposes a faith,” Carpentier asserts, and with this one stroke he traces the line of demarcation between two radically different domains. Along the fault line of “faith” he establishes the axis that separates “marvelous reality”—and all that is linked to it—from the sphere of the unreal, the province that the European literati inhabit and from
which they appear unable to escape. Carpentier repeatedly associates the components of disbelief with superficiality; he casts them as surface appearances that are false and ultimately impotent deceptions. In contrast, he imbues the elements of faith with a depth derived from that overwhelming, enduring, and transforming “marvelous reality.”

To reinforce the pivotal role of “faith,” Carpentier offers a list of examples of prominent and powerful figures whose history-altering efforts sprang from acceptance of the marvelous reality that always subsumes art and reason: Cervantes, Marco Polo, Luther, Victor Hugo (who “believed in spirits because he was convinced that he had spoken, in Guernsey, to the ghost of Lèopoldine”), Van Gogh. . . . In contrast, “those who do not believe in saints will not be cured by the miracles of saints,” Carpentier notes (xi; ¶2). He goes on to excoriate the Surrealists and two other contemporary intellectual camps for their spurious claims to represent realities that are no more than faithless fictions:

The marvelous born of disbelief—as in the long years of Surrealism—was never more than a literary ruse, as tedious, after a time as certain brand of ‘ordered’ oneiric literature, certain eulogies of madness, with which we are all too familiar. . But this is not, of course, to concede the argument to those who advocate *a return to the real*—a term which acquires, then, a gregariously political meaning—who do nothing more than substitute for the magician’s tricks the commonplaces of the committed man of letters or the eschatological humor of certain existentialists. (xii; ¶2)

In order to summarize his point about the fallacious and powerless pursuits of these faithless European intellectuals, Carpentier refocuses his attack on the progenitors of “the marvelous born of disbelief”:

It is undoubtedly true that there is scant defense for poets and artists who praise sadism without practicing it, who admire a miraculous virility on account of their own impotence, who invoke spirits without believing in spells, and who found secret societies, literary sects, vaguely philosophical groups, with saints and signs and arcane objectives—never attained—without being able to conceive of a valid mysticism or abandon their petty habits in order to gamble their souls on the fearful card of faith. (xii; ¶2)
The language of these passages paints a clear picture of the results of disbelief: the “literary ruse” of “poets and artists who praise sadism without practicing it” is full of hypocrisy; these intellectuals’ faithless appeals to “the marvelous” only hide “their own impotence” and veil “arcane objectives” that are “never attained”; their efforts are invalid, “petty,” and weak. Ultimately, in chasing after a “marvelous born of disbelief,” the “miracle workers turned bureaucrats” do not have the courage to abandon their own limited rationalism—despite their claims to the contrary—and remain incapable of “gamb[ing] their souls on the fearful card of faith.”

Carpentier’s emphasis on faith is striking. His insistence reveals the surprising twist his discussion takes in building its critique. Is his turn really only a return? In emphasizing “faith,” does Carpentier simply come back to a species of theology supposedly displaced by modernity? Such questions linger, even after the end of Carpentier’s essay. It is possible to read “the marvelous reality” as Carpentier’s substitute for “God.” Carpentier never asserts the definitive existence of an overarching and independent presence that precedes human design. Significantly, he talks only about means to perceptions—or intuitions—of “the marvelous.” I will return to this critical distinction shortly. Nevertheless, Carpentier poses the “Prologue” as a kind of alternate theology that subsumes familiar rationalistic pursuits. At the same time, his refusal to invoke God is also telling. In the first sentences of the essay, he gestures toward the volatile place of ‘God’ in modernity. Such volatility surfaces in the ruins of “the kingdom of Henri Christophe.” Columbus set off on a voyage in the name of God, and that endeavor led him to the Caribbean and put history on its course to the present form of modernity. As a critique of that legacy, Carpentier understood his inability to fall back on the same old terms. He hoped to develop his project at the places of rupture in modernity’s
language; he wanted to build on its linguistic as well as its monumental ruins. His
citations of “faith” emerge at the center of that tricky task.

Carpentier’s objectives come into clearer focus as he proceeds. His proclamation in
the opening passages of his prologue of the need for “faith” in “the marvelous reality”
divulges the archaicism of his project. Whether one describes his argument as theological,
onto-theological, or in other terms, he lays bare the ontological grounding for his argument:
“the marvelous reality” is arche, the source of history and society itself. His desire to connect
with that arche has already become apparent. He makes no secret that, unlike the European
literati, he faithfully seeks those “miracles” in which “the marvelous becomes unequivocally
marvelous” and raises “the spirit […] to a kind of ‘limit state.’” Carpentier’s rebuke of the
Surrealists’ “marvelous born of disbelief” shows that, for him, archaic experiences
“presuppose faith” in a reality that includes phenomena that exist outside of reason and
confound it. In Carpentier’s view, the Surrealists may be correct in exposing rationalism as a
root of modernity’s problems but their disbelief keeps them trapped in the rationalist sphere.

4.

According to Carpentier’s initial terms, the path across the fault line between the
European literati’s “marvelous born of disbelief” toward recognition of “the marvelous
reality” should be fairly straightforward, even if the road is not an easy one. What one needs
to do, it would seem, is to make the leap of faith, to accept the appearance in reality of
phenomena that subsume the bounds of reason and confound it. Nevertheless, the fame of
Carpentier’s essay stems in part from the other points of difference that he identifies. The
dividing line that splits the marvelous into two domains does not run exclusively along the
ground between disbelief and faith. According to Carpentier, the rupture is also geographic. He suggests that European intellectual disbelief develops largely from the fact that “the marvelous reality” shows itself in particular places. It does not typically appear in Europe and belongs especially to the Americas. In one of his most famous passages, Carpentier returns to recollect the where and the when—namely, Haiti 1943—of his realization of the roots of European intellectual futility. Again, the location of his revelation is critical: The Europeans’ lack of faith became particularly clear to me during my stay in Haiti, where I found myself in daily contact with something which might be called the marvelous in the real. I was treading on land where thousands of men anxious for freedom had believed in the lycanthropic powers of Macandal, to the point where this collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution. I already knew the extraordinary tale of Bouckman, the Jamaican initiate. I had been in the Citadel of La Ferrière, a work without architectural antecedents, foreshadowed only in the *Imaginary Prisons* of Piranesi. I had breathed the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, a monarch of incredible exploits, far more astonishing than all the cruel kings invented by the Surrealists, so fond of tyrannies of the imaginary variety, although they never had to endure them in reality. At every step I encountered the marvelous in the real. But I also thought that the presence and prevalence of this marvelous reality was not a privilege unique to Haiti, but the patrimony of the whole of America, where there has yet to be drawn up, for example, a complete list of cosmogonies.  

(xiii; ¶3)

In Carpentier’s view, “the marvelous” repeatedly appears in the realities of the history and landscape of the Americas. He runs through some historical examples that illustrate how “the fantastic is to be found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates on the history of the Continent and who left names still borne to this day” (xiii; ¶3). In other words, the names of places throughout the Americas record historical truths “far more astonishing” than anything an artist could invent. By underscoring that it was by “treading on land” that “the patrimony of the whole of America” revealed itself to him, Carpentier underscores how the inscription of the marvelous reality on the landscape is natural as well as historical.
From the first lines of the prologue—well before he makes the point explicitly—Carpentier intimates the idea that the marvelous reality surfaces exclusively in the American domain. As we have seen, his revelations about European “imaginative poverty” arise from “having felt the indisputable charm of the Haitian landscape, having found magical portents in the red roads of the Central Plateau, and heard the drums of the Voodoo gods Petro and Rada.” In another early passage, Carpentier slips in another comparison that exposes non-American “impotence” and suggests the necessary exclusivity of the marvelous reality:

Note that when Andre Masson wanted to draw the jungle of the island of Martinique, with its incredible tangle of plants and the obscene promiscuity of certain of its fruits, the prodigious truth of the subject devoured the painter, leaving him all but impotent before the blank paper. And it was left to a painter from America, the Cuban Wilfredo Lam, to show us the magic of tropical vegetation, the unbridled Creation of Forms of our nature—with all its metamorphoses and symbioses—in monumental canvases of an expressiveness unique in contemporary painting. (x-xi; ¶2)

The passage is crucial to Carpentier’s project by implying that, even if non-Americans have “faith” in the marvelous reality, they remain fundamentally incapable of perceiving it. In a footnote to the passage, Carpentier reinforces that idea: “Note with what prestige the works of Wilfredo Lam stand out, in their profound originality, among those of other painters collected in the special issue—an overview of modern art—published in 1946 by Cahiers d’Art” (xi; ¶2).

Still, as Carpentier’s references to Lam make clear, the American patrimony of the marvelous reality extends beyond the realm of perception. In one of the prologue’s most recognized sentences, Carpentier summarizes his discussion of the American “patrimony” of the marvelous reality. In his statement, he identifies its traces in the natural and historical landscape of the Americas, in Americans’ powers of perception, in their ideas, traditions and stories, and finally, in their bodies. “The point,” he concludes, “is that, because of its virginal
landscape, its formation, its ontology, the Faustian presence of both Indian and Negro, the Revelation represented by its recent discovery, and the fertile interbreeding it has fostered, America is far from having drained its well of mythologies” (xiv-xv; ¶4).

With this statement, Carpentier suggests that the unprecedented collision of races endows Americans with a marvelous reality that non-Americans—and especially European intellectuals—could never understand, even with wholehearted faith. And in that gesture toward exclusivity, Carpentier splits his own critical term. He qualifies “the marvelous reality” as “lo real maravilloso Americano,” that is, as “a marvelous American reality.” He does nothing to dispel the implication that “the marvelous reality” and “the marvelous American reality” are, in fact, one and the same thing. If his alternative vision of reality occupies a deliberately interventionist position by marking off the limits of rationalism and gesturing toward another kind of intellectual politics, Carpentier’s prologue also literally situates that critique in the Americas. He presents the region as the primary—and, quite possibly, only—province of the marvelous reality.

5.

As Carpentier’s prologue plays around ruptures in key terms to offer an Americanist engagement with modernity, another set of unexamined terms repeatedly surfaces: “magic,” “magical,” and “magicians.” He never explicitly addresses the nature of magic, but his pivotal characterization of the “unequivocally marvelous,” in splitting the marvelous into two divergent registers, also ruptures magic along the fault line of faith. Most tellingly, Carpentier refers to the spokesmen of “the marvelous born of disbelief” as “cheap magicians” and describes their tactics as “conjuring tricks.” These characterizations imply
that the “magic” of the faithless is nothing more than deception. These magicians “bring together objects which would never normally meet” and then try to pass off their fantastic creations as reflections of some “marvelous” externality. However, since they lack faith in the realities they claim to represent, the “miracle workers turned bureaucrats” can never escape the false world of their own art. Ultimately, their “conjuring tricks” only refer back to their own aesthetics and have no effect. Carpentier reinforces this conception of bogus magic in taking on “those who advocate a return to the real,” which only replaces “the magician’s tricks” with other kinds of deceptive appeals to realities that do not extend into the “marvelous” register that “presupposes faith.”

Yet, if Carpentier calls attention to “cheap magicians” who rely on deceptive and impotent “conjuring tricks,” he also invokes another type of magic. Like the “unequivocally marvelous” that contrasts with “the marvelous born of disbelief,” the second sphere of magic falls across from “cheap” magic on the far side of faith. Or, more accurately, this other magic resides in that other sphere that the faithless do not accept. In Carpentier’s system, there are valuable forms of magic that only the faithful can recognize since these true types issue forth from “the marvelous reality.” Unlike “the conjuring tricks” of “cheap magicians,” the other kinds of magic do not properly belong to the sphere of human action. They are embedded in reality itself and, accordingly, expose it to the faithful as “marvelous.”

Without explanation or any trace of reflexivity, Carpentier refers to this magic in the opening passage of the essay. It is after “having found magical portents in the red roads of the Central Plateau” of Haiti that he “was moved to compare the marvelous reality I had recently experienced with that exhausting attempt to invoke the marvelous which has characterized certain European literatures of the last thirty years.” In other words, “the
magical portents” embedded in “the red roads” point Carpentier directly to “the marvelous reality.” In another passage, he refers, once again without any trace of irony, to magic in a similar vein. Magic arises as a material element embedded in Haiti’s landscape: “It was left to a painter from America, the Cuban Wilfredo Lam, to show us the magic of tropical vegetation [esa mágia de la vegetación tropical], the unbridled Creation of Forms of our nature—with all its metamorphoses and symbioses—in monumental canvases of an expressiveness unique in contemporary painting.” Like “the red roads of the Central Plateau,” “tropical vegetation”—and, more broadly, “nature” with its “unbridled Creation of Forms” and “all its metamorphoses and symbioses”—carries “magic” as part of its constitution.

Carpentier seems to have established a clear boundary between the “tricks” of “cheap magicians” and a “magic” that arises as a material constituent of the marvelous reality, but then he refers to other “magical” forms in ways that threaten to wipe out his line of demarcation. In these other references, Carpentier takes magic out of the landscape and puts it back into the social sphere. For instance, he refers to “magic” as a system of practices surrounding Macandal, the legendary figure often credited with galvanizing the slave resistance that led to the Saint-Domingue Revolution and the eventual independence of Haiti. In following the basic structure of his essay, Carpentier underscores how the marvelous reality emanating from the Macandal case exposes the inconsequentiality of contemporary European intellectual pursuits:

There is a moment, in the sixth of the Chants de Maldoror, when the hero, pursued by all the police in the world, escapes from an “army of agents and spies” by adopting the form of different animals and making use of his gift of being able to transport himself in an instant to Peking, Madrid or Saint Petersburg. This is “fantastic literature” at its most uninhibited. But in America, where nothing similar has been written, there existed a Macandal
endowed with these same powers by the faith of his contemporaries, and who
inspired, with that magic, one of the strangest and most dramatic uprisings in
History. Maldoror—Ducasse himself confesses it—was never anything more
than a “poetic Rocambole.” His only legacy was a literary school of ephemeral
duration. The American Macandal, on the other hand, left behind a whole
mythology, along with magical hymns, preserved by an entire people, which
are still sung in Voodoo ceremonies. (xiv: ¶4)

According to the passage, Macandal and the traditions he inspired possess an enduring and
socially transforming power that amplifies Maldoror’s relative insignificance. The fantastic
events of the Chants de Maldoror never escape the confines of literature while Macandal’s
“magic” and the “magical hymns” based on his legend exist in another realm. Again,
Carpentier emphasizes faith as the component that separates Maldoror’s fantasies from the
magic of and about Macandal. In Carpentier’s formulation, what “endowed” Macandal with
his magic powers and catalyzed “one of the strangest and most dramatic uprisings in History”
was, quite simply, “the faith of his contemporaries.” In turn, the “magical hymns” are
expressions of that faith.

But what do these references make of magic in Carpentier’s discussion? Is “magic”
expression of faith or its object? Does “magic” play out in human practice or does it arise
elsewhere as a component of “the marvelous in the real”? Carpentier’s understanding of
magic becomes somewhat clearer in another passing reference. He invokes the magical as he
comes to the end of the passage in which he asserts that “the presence and prevalence of this
marvelous reality [is] not a privilege unique to Haiti, but the patrimony of the whole of
America.” In highlighting how the “patrimony” of the marvelously real does not extend to
Europe, Carpentier offers an example:

It is clear that, whereas in Western Europe folk dance, for instance, has lost all
magical or invocatory character [todo carácter mágico o invocatorio], rare is
the collective dance in America that does not incorporate a deep ritualistic
meaning, becoming almost a ceremony of initiation: such as the dances of the
Cuban santería, or the extraordinary negro version of the festival of Corpus
Christi, which can still be seen in the town of San Francisco de Yare, in Venezuela. (xiv; ¶3)

Here, in what seems like afterthought, Carpentier links “magical” and “invocatory” as synonyms. Still, the juxtaposition of terms illuminates a critical notion that he never directly explains. As “invocatory,” that which is “magical” offers itself as a conduit for the marvelous reality. The magical ‘invokes’ in the literal sense: through itself it makes another entity present. Invocation is more than mimicry-in-absence.

Significantly, Carpentier also connects “magical or invocatory character” to “collective” expressions that “incorporate a deep ritualistic meaning, becoming almost a ceremony of initiation.” These statements tie back into Carpentier’s pivotal description of how “the marvelous becomes unequivocally marvelous,” and the two passages help to clarify each other.21 The “magical,” with its “ritualistic meaning” and sense of “ceremony,” are “collective” efforts to ‘invoke’ “marvelous reality” in the social sphere, that is, to create a channel for its irruption into the human world. In the first passage, Carpentier highlights the potential effects of “magical” endeavors: “a miracle” might result from following certain “invocatory” patterns, by enacting rituals or “ceremonies of initiation”; the undertaking might produce “a privileged revelation of reality” that, in turn, leads to “an exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of ‘limit state.’” In other words, the “magical,” as “invocatory,” calls upon “the marvelous reality” to make itself palpable in order to provide means for transforming the social sphere by altering perception (“an amplification of the measures and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity”). In Carpentier’s

21Remember that in an earlier passage Carpentier already establishes an implicit relation between magic and marvelous reality. He sets up his description as a corrective to other, unreal types of magic: “But what many forget, in distinguishing themselves as cheap magicians, is that the marvelous becomes unequivocally marvelous […]” (xi; ¶2).
estimation, the “dances of Cuban santería” and “the negro version of the festival of Corpus Christi” serve as outstanding examples of such “invocatory” collective undertakings.

From this standpoint, Carpentier figures magic as pivotal, in multiple senses of the term. Although he never explicitly describes it in such terms, magic acts as instrument of mediation in his system. “The marvelously real” becomes visible through magic, whether it is the “magic” inscribed in the landscape of the Americas, Macandal’s “magic,” or the “magical” invocations that actively seek “a privileged revelation of reality.”

6.

In identifying the transforming experiences of the marvelous reality enabled by magic, Carpentier hints at the objectives of his own pursuits. His essay points toward a mode of artistic production that takes its cue from the “magical hymns” of Voodoo and ritual of “magical or invocatory character.” Specifically, Carpentier signals a form of writing that, like those magical forms, lets “the marvelous reality” emerge on its own terms through invocation. In the final section of the prologue, Carpentier describes his text—or, more precisely, the novel that the essay introduces—in precisely that way. In the last line of the essay, Carpentier poses a rhetorical question that he has already answered by that point: “What is the history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous in the real?” (xv; ¶5). The question echoes back over the preceding section and across the essay as a whole. The final phrase reveals that Carpentier’s task all along has been to establish the basis for an aesthetics that, in drawing on “the history of America,” functions as “chronicle of the marvelous in the real.”
From that standpoint, Carpentier offers his novel as a record of the episode in Latin American history around which his prologue circles all along: the Saint-Domingue slave uprising that led to Haiti’s creation and marked its already-fantastic landscape and culture with Macandal’s magic and other traces of “the marvelously real” that enveloped Carpentier on his 1943 trip. In presenting the text as a “chronicle,” Carpentier makes his critical move: he tries to erase his own authorial role. Carpentier insists that the book was written “without any systematic intention on my part” (xv; ¶5). He describes himself as an archivist instead of an author:

It must be stressed that the ensuing story is based on the most rigorous documentation, which not only respects the historical truth of events, the names of characters—including secondary ones—places and even streets, but which conceals, beneath its apparent intemporality, a meticulous collation of dates and chronologies. (xv; ¶5)

The construction of the text, according to Carpentier, follows from “rigorous documentation” and “meticulous collation of dates and chronologies.” He suggests that, as author, he does nothing more than relate the ‘who, where, and what’ of an important historical epoch. The Kingdom of This World, Carpentier explains, “narrate[s] a sequence of extraordinary happenings which took place on the island of Santo Domingo, in the space of a period which does not equal the span of a man’s life” (xv; ¶5). This method of narration, Carpentier emphasizes, reveals that he did not write The Kingdom of This World; the book was written through him. By recovering and presenting “the historical truth,” The Kingdom of the World “allow[s] the marvelous to flow freely from a reality precise in all its details.” As chronicler, he functions merely as an instrument of revelation, as a cipher. “And yet,” Carpentier asserts, because of the dramatic singularity of the events, the fantastic elegance of the characters encountered at a given moments at the enchanted crossroads of the Ciudad del Cabo, everything seems fabulous in a story impossible to situate in Europe, and which is nonetheless just as real as any exemplary incident consigned, for the purposes of pedagogy, to scholarly textbooks. (xv; ¶5)
By now, the Americanism of Carpentier’s project is clear, and this last statement only reinforces the point. Only the Latin American appears to have access to “the marvelous [that] flow[s] freely from a reality precise in all its details.” Because of the fantastic domain in which the Latin American lives, he understands that “everything [that] seems fabulous […] is nonetheless just as real as” the so-called ‘facts’ of rationalist historiography. He has “faith” in “the marvelous in the real.” Thus, The Kingdom of This World is “a story impossible to situate in Europe” and also, Carpentier implies, a story impossible for a European to tell. The prologue’s last section on method completes Carpentier’s efforts at displacement. In the end, he has inscribed “magic” into the Latin American text in order to displace “the conjuring tricks” of Europe’s “cheap magicians.”

Carpentier’s prologue closes with a rhetorical question, and it solicits other questions. If The Kingdom of This World is a “history of America” that functions as “a chronicle of the marvelous in the real,” what is that sort of “chronicle” if not a claim to magic? When the question is turned back around into a statement, it show how Carpentier’s description of The Kingdom of This World positions the novel—according to the prologue’s own implied terms—as a form of magic. As noted above, Carpentier’s references cast magic as an “invocatory” pursuit, that is, as “ritualistic” procedures through which to create conditions that generate “a privileged revelation of reality” in its full marvelousness. Carpentier’s description of The Kingdom of This World clearly fits that notion of magic: “In [the story] is narrated a sequence of extraordinary happenings which […] allow[s] the marvelous to flow freely from a reality precise in all its details.” And as such—as magic—Carpentier also indicates without explicitly stating that he endows his text with magical effect. Specifically, he conceives of the novel—with its lack of “any systematic intention”—as the means to “a
miracle,” as the catalyst “to an exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of ‘limit state.’” For Carpentier, the text acts as ritual. Like the “dances of Cuban santería” and “the magical hymns […] sung in Voodoo ceremonies,” the “chronicle” presents itself as a conduit for “the marvelous” into the world of humans endowed with a reason that cannot grasp reality in its entirety. Carpentier hopes that, as it erupts into that seemingly mundane sphere, “the marvelously reality” will generate “an unexpected alteration” and transform society.

7.

So what to make of all of these different forms of magic that appear in Carpentier’s essay? His emphasis on the magic embodied in The Kingdom of This World may be alluring, but the prologue quickly reveals itself as an open trick. What becomes almost immediately apparent in the final section of Carpentier’s prologue is the paradoxical relation between the essay and the book it introduces. The most obvious paradox is that Carpentier has to call attention to the magical textual manifestations of the marvelous reality enabled by his purported lack of design. He feels compelled to point out systematically and intentionally that he compiled his novel “without any systematic intention”; he is moved in the introductory essay to reflect on and to theorize the ostensible unreflexivity and absence of theoretical presuppositions in the story that follows. Therefore, the distance between what the prologue is—a polemical and inherently political meditation on the status of mediation and mediators—and what the prologue says—that the marvelous appears through the mediator’s
refusal to premeditate—already destabilizes the foundations of Carpentier’s claims about, and to, the magic of the marvelously real.  

The foundational instability deepens in light of the actual composition of The Kingdom of This World. As various critics have demonstrated in dissecting the novel, many of Carpentier’s claims appear valid: his text does develop from “a meticulous collation of dates and chronologies”; the “story is based on the most rigorous documentation [that] respects the historical truth of events, the names of characters—including secondary ones—places and even streets”; and, in its attention to archival material, the novel is marvelously “precise in all of its details.” Some scholars have identified the likely sources for Carpentier’s “collation” and, indeed, The Kingdom of This World directly incorporates many first-hand accounts of people, places, and episodes from the Saint-Domingue uprisings. And within the historically verifiable “chronologies” that Carpentier assembles, some awesome correspondences seem to emerge. Historical events link with natural and temporal cycles: predictions that Macandal’s uprising would begin with thunder and lightning came true; ceremonies calling for the downfall of colonial power repeatedly occur on festival Sundays while subsequent fulfillment of the ritual invocations invariably take place some time later yet always on a Monday. Marvels such as these crop up throughout the story as well as in the structure of Carpentier’s “narrat[ion of the] sequence of extraordinary

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22I am far from the first reader to the note the paradox inherent in Carpentier’s prologue and in its relation to the story the essay introduces. For an early commentary that touches on the issue, see Alegria 1960.

23See Volek 1969. González Echevarría (1990: 125-54) develops Volek’s analysis of the composition and structure of The Kingdom of This World in order to show Carpentier’s role in designing the text despite his claims in the prologue to the contrary. As indicated below, I draw especially on González Echevarría’s discussion in my summary of the issue below.

happenings which took place on the island of Santo Domingo.” The marvels “flow freely”—and, it seems, endlessly—from the precision of Carpentier’s chronicle.

However, the source of the text’s marvelousness remains in question because, despite Carpentier’s insistence on the lack of “any systematic intention on my part,” he undoubtedly played a role in the design of the story. As Roberto González Echevarría demonstrates in an extended and careful analysis of The Kingdom of This World, in the book “coincidence is startling […] but it is not completely historical” (1990: 139). Carpentier’s “collation” is selective as well as selectively doctored. He includes only dates and events that suggest a marvelous reality at work in history and, if necessary, he even changes historical facts to fit the ostensibly cosmic scheme: the only days that Carpentier chooses to mention are Sundays and Mondays, and he shifts a key event—the Sunday of Henri Christophe’s death—from October 8, 1820 to August 22 to create a pattern of ritual and historical change according to certain dates (González-Echevarría 1990: 139). Other examples of Carpentier’s intervention abound.

Thus, the explicit intentions of the prologue and the concealed designs of The Kingdom of This World appear to undermine the whole system that Carpentier circumscribes around the magic of aesthetic non-intentionality. In the end, “the marvelous reality” that he invokes and on which he stakes his Americanist polemic seems like a wonder born of the same kind of “conjuring tricks” for which he excoriates the European literati. The only potential point of separation between Carpentier and those “disguised as cheap magicians” is faith, and even that issue remains uncertain. Does Carpentier’s critical insistence that “the marvelous presupposes faith” simply serve as a new disguise for cheap magic? Do the interlocking fictions that Carpentier creates in and between the prologue and The Kingdom of
This World enable him to move out of the aesthetic sphere that, he insists, set the boundaries of European intellectuals’ disbelief?

Suddenly, Carpentier’s text comes full circle. The intricacy of The Kingdom of This World, the complexity of the entire set up, can only mean one thing: Carpentier wanted to make his tricks obvious. He did not simply misjudge the intelligence of his readers, believing that they would never pick up on his manipulations. He put them there deliberately and for anyone to see . . . if the reader is willing to look closely enough. He hoped that discerning readers would do what he does: call his whole enterprise into question. But why does Carpentier turn his whole purported system on its head? Where does “the marvelous” appear in his now-duplicitous “chronicle” of “the real”? Carpentier’s explicit duplicity brings the problem back to the prologue’s critical engagement with Surrealism. Even with the revelation of Carpentier’s tricks in The Kingdom of This World, the novel’s prologue signals a departure from the European aesthetes’ disbelief.

Still, the ground of faith has shifted once again. It turns out that Carpentier does not take the Europeans to task for their faithlessness toward some kind of Platonic “reality.” In fact, another look at the prologue reveals that it is the Surrealists who take too seriously the idea of “the marvelous” as an order of reality beyond the bounds of reason. Carpentier talks about how the marvelous is “pursued” and “evoked” by the European literati. The folly of their endeavors—their whole “literary ruse”—stems from a misunderstanding of the fundamentally fictive nature of the marvelous in the first place. The Europeans try to conjure the marvelous through clumsy “conjuring tricks”—using “a certain brand of ‘ordered’ oneiric literature” and “bringing together objects which would normally never meet”—without realizing that “the marvelously real” only appears through a subtle sleight-of-hand. The
magic of the European “magicians” is “cheap” because they believe they can draw the marvelous into this world through thoughtless and arbitrary acts. Carpentier’s dismissal of “the marvelous born of disbelief” refers to the Europeans’ bad faith toward their art, arising from too much faith in a marvelous reality separate from their creations. It turns out that, for Carpentier, the marvelous is the handiwork of qualified magicians after all. For him, where does the order in “‘ordered’ oneiric literature” derive? It does not stem from the esoteric, as implied in the Surrealist celebration of the unconscious-as-cipher. Rather, a marvelous order arises from literature itself, and therefore only hyperconsciousness will do. In the end, “the kingdom of this world” is textuality itself. In Carpentier’s tricky scheme, we are caught in the reality of our own aesthetic creations, in the marvelous truths of the “texts” we write into and on to the world.

From this standpoint, Carpentier’s project sublimates—in a truly Hegelian sense—European modernism’s engagement with modernity. The prologue follows Surrealism’s critique of modern rationalism in order to turn that critical endeavor back on itself. In juxtaposing the “ruins” of Haiti with “that exhausting attempt to invoke the marvelous that has characterized certain European literatures of the last thirty years,” Carpentier implicates modernism in the ruinous processes it seeks to unsettle. By placing ultimate faith in a marvelous ontological reality, the Surrealists give further strength to the idea of a non-social ‘truth’ undergirded the repressive ‘modernity’ of history. Carpentier does figure his text as magical—and, more specifically, as a form of displacing magic—but the pivot in the whole scheme is the power of perception. Perception is—to use Carpentier’s critical qualifier for magic—“invocatory.” The cognitive act functions as the determining mediator that literally “invokes,” or makes present, other marvelous realities. In a pivotal section of his essay,
Carpentier insists, “there is scant defense for poets and artists […] who invoke spirits without believing in spells.” Again, this critique of the Surrealists points to faith in the power of “spells” more than in some external reality.

This continual doubling-back on cognition in Carpentier’s prologue exposes the text as a curiously modernist critique of modernity. It draws directly on the Kantian legacy of reflecting on reflection and, in so doing, discovering simultaneously the limits and possibilities of knowledge. As I demonstrate in the coming chapters, the essay’s self-reflexivity arrives as a late example in a longer line of Cuban intellectual discourse. And, as such, Carpentier’s famous 1949 prologue—in disclosing its own artifice as a way to unsettle reified images of order—functions as a deliberate, magically conceived cubanismo.
CHAPTER 2: DISPLACED POLITICS: FLIGHTS OF CUBAN CULTURE (1924-1936)

Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.

Walter Benjamin (1936)

I had the misfortune of getting mixed up in politics.

Fernando Ortiz (1942)

1.

I began the last chapter with an epigraph from and corresponding discussion of Walter Benjamin’s ambivalent engagement with Surrealist activities in Paris between his arrival there in 1929 and his flight from the city in 1940. My subsequent discussion of Alejo Carpentier’s famous prologue to his 1949 novel, *El reino de este mundo* [The Kingdom of This World], demonstrated that references to Benjamin with regard to early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse serve as more than theoretical invocations. While ‘Benjaminian thought’ functions as an increasingly common touchstone within contemporary criticism, Carpentier’s prologue—as another critical response to Surrealism’s efforts “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution”—shows that the debate over “theory” between Benjamin and Adorno moved in a circuit of discourse through which Cuban considerations of magic and modernity also passed. Benjamin’s and Carpentier’s texts were
contemporaneous and coincidental, and their correspondences in time and theme reveal direct historical connections between today’s popular ‘Benjaminian’ and ‘magical realist’ critical postures.

In this chapter, I continue to explore those historical connections in order to illustrate how the links between the European avant-garde and Cuban intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s went far beyond Benjamin and Carpentier and their mutual engagements with French Surrealism. I provide an historical frame that shows the degree to which Carpentier’s prologue emerged out of and exemplified a more general Cuban intellectual dynamic. In fact, the ongoing engagement with the European avant-garde defined the discourse of displacing magic all along. In that regard, Carpentier’s prologue from the late 1940s stands as a more recent example enabled by critical developments of the 1930s. As I highlight in this chapter and in those that follow, it was in responding critically to the activities of the European avant-garde during the 1930s that Cuban intellectuals began to articulate more clearly an interventionist politics based on truthful “documentation” of Latin American history and culture. Carpentier subsequently formalized this idea by calling in his prologue for “chronicles of the marvelous in the real.” In the current chapter, I focus especially on how Carpentier’s stance—clearly a politics rooted in the aesthetics of particular kind of “chronicle”—reflects a general retreat after 1933 of Cuban intellectuals from direct modes of political engagement into a more clandestine ‘politics of culture.’

And, from that standpoint, the similarities and differences between Cuban and European intellectual activities during the period are so telling. On one hand, the Cubans’ reliance on “culture” as intervention paralleled European developments during a decade of rising conservative, or openly fascist, political tides in Latin America as well as in Europe.
Intellectuals in both regions looked more often toward culture when confronted with shrinking spheres of traditional politics. Perhaps nothing indicates the transcontinental common ground among intellectuals of the period better than the actual ground across which many of them moved. In other words, many intellectuals—Latin American and European alike—were forced into flight. In the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, they found themselves suddenly, and often unexpectedly, displaced.

On the other hand, the trajectories of the politics of culture diverged as the Latin Americans—drawing on but also reacting to the European avant-garde—turned to modernist realism, that is, to “aesthetic theatricalizations” and “chronicles” of their region’s marvelous ‘realities.’ The Society for Afro-Cuban Studies materialized in this historical context among Cuban intellectuals, many of whom were physically displaced at one time or another beginning in the late 1920s and for whom the discourse of displacing magic operated as a unique and seemingly necessary political strategy. As a way to outline these historical developments, let me once again turn to Alejo Carpentier’s story by way of Walter Benjamin.

2.

In addition to certain correspondences in time and theme, another significant parallel arises from Walter Benjamin’s and Alejo Carpentier’s engagements with Surrealist activities. As mentioned in the last chapter, both of those projects stem from the two writers’ coincidence of place. For both men, that concurrence also arose from a mutual experience of displacement. They arrived in Paris around the same time—1928 in Carpentier’s case; 1929 for Benjamin—in trying to escape perceived threats to their lives amidst the political ferment embroiling their native countries. Carpentier came from Havana after a stint in jail for
involvement in leftist political protests while Benjamin, a non-religious Jew, arrived from Berlin in the hopes of finding more work and relief from the rising tide of anti-Semitism. And just as political uncertainty at home led them to Paris, so too did it force them into flight from the city: Carpentier and Benjamin each remained there for around eleven years and then left within months of each other as the likelihood of Nazi occupation of Paris increased.

It was during those last months in Paris that Benjamin composed his famous “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” In the text, Benjamin imagined a mode of philosophy that could unsettle the growing forces of oppression at work at that moment. “It is our task to bring about a real state of emergency,” he writes, “and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism” (Benjamin 1968: 257). For Benjamin, “historical materialism” operates as the catalyst to this “state of emergency.” But, in his view, “historical materialism” has to make a surprise move. It has to overcome escape the limitations of modern rationalism that ground critical historiography. “‘Historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which, as we know, is wizened and keeps out of sight” (253).

Through this image of a “‘historical materialism’” that “enlists the services of theology,” Benjamin hoped to address the urgent situation that he had marked in closing another essay from 1936. In a now-familiar conclusion to “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin summarizes a key point of his argument: that after Kant, the aesthetic powers of humans have become the primary object of their own reflection. According to Benjamin, this solipsism has led to a dangerous form of “self-alienation”: “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can
experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (Benjamin 1968: 242). He interprets his contemporary socio-political environment accordingly. “This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic,” he decries. In other words, the Nazis and other Fascists had turned politics into a gruesome aesthetic spectacle that the public witnessed as spectators, as if they were not actually participants. From Benjamin’s standpoint, the necessary response is evident: “Communism responds by politicizing art.” “Communism”—by which Benjamin figures a viable opposition to Fascism—takes up “art,” or culture more generally, as a “political” tool to counteract the aestheticization of politics. Social revolution depended upon the politicization of cultural endeavors.

Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” sets forth terms by which that revolutionary project should proceed. His call for a theologically savvy “‘historical materialism’” that would “bring about a real state of emergency” and “improve our position in the struggle against Fascism” points to the mobilization of historical images—historiography as “art”—as a way to invoke alternatives to current or familiar realities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Benjamin referred to interventionist representation as “dialectical images.” In the last passages of the “Theses,” Benjamin links “dialectical” critical historiography with a kind of “magic” in which time—the very framework of our endeavors—assumes significance neither as “homogenous” nor “empty” (264). Those hollow experiences of time pervade modernity, Benjamin suggest, and the recovery of a theological sensibility by “historical materialism” would counteract the pull of “Fascism” by infusing modern life with a sense of “Messianic” import. People would recover a fuller, much-needed sense of significance to their actions.
Undoubtedly, Benjamin’s ideas about “ politicizing art” as a counter-“Fascist” project were unique. Still, as I considered in the last chapter, his thinking was part of a wider circuit of discourse. As suggested by his 1938 exchange with Adorno, Benjamin’s essays from the late 1930s bear the clear marks of Surrealism. He echoes the explicit objectives of Surrealist endeavors by gesturing towards a politicized art that “enlists the services of theology” and, in so doing, verges on “magic.” Once again, Benjamin’s 1929 characterization of Surrealism could be applied to his own expressed goals for a politics of culture: “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution.”

3.

From that perspective, the correspondences between Benjamin’s and Carpentier’s histories intensify and make the juxtaposition of their work all the more illuminating. In some respects, Carpentier’s thinking as he fled Paris moved along a trajectory parallel to Benjamin’s work. During the months that Benjamin was working on “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Carpentier also was busy with a Surrealist-inflected project with theological overtones. In his own set of theses, he imagined an urgently needed personal and social spiritual revitalization catalyzed by the production of transforming images along the lines of Benjamin’s “dialectical images.” Carpentier, whose political involvements in the late 1920s forced him to run to Paris in the first place, left the city a decade later to arrive at his own call for a politics of culture that would circumvent a sphere of traditional political activism that seemingly had closed by late 1939.

But if the various correspondences between the physical and intellectual flights of the displaced German and the displaced Cuban in 1939 are striking, the differences in their
movements were also critical. Most immediately, Benjamin’s escape from Paris ended in death by his own hand on the French-Spanish border while Carpentier’s getaway from the city and its intellectual circles became for him the multifaceted rebirth in America that he would textualize almost a decade later in *The Kingdom of This World* and its prologue.

Invigorated by an arrival in Havana that was at once a break from and return to the origins of his French-born, Cuban-located family, Carpentier went on to produce all of the major work in his long and illustrious career. And, as we have already seen, Carpentier’s physical relocation to the Americas led him to an engagement with Surrealism that, by virtue of its insistence on “chronicles” of the Americas, diverged from Benjamin’s call for a mode of illuminating historiography that was not necessarily limited to a particular hemisphere. The explicit Americanism of Carpentier’s work of the late 1940s appeared to germinate with his return to Cuba.

One of the first projects that Carpentier undertook upon his arrival back on the island in 1939 was a series of articles for *Carteles*, a leading cultural journal, entitled “La Habana vista por un turista cubana” [Havana Seen By a Cuban Tourist]. The articles clearly echo prominent Surrealist literature, like Aragon’s *Le paysan de Paris* (1926) and Breton’s ‘Paris trilogy’ [*Nadja* (1928), *Les vases communicants* (1932), and *L’amour fou* (1937)]. As in those texts, Carpentier wanders familiar urban terrain and discovers its “marvels,” that is, those surprising and previously unrecognized elements embedded in the history and contours of the city’s landscape. “An eleven year absence indisputably confers upon anyone returning to his country the soul of a tourist,” Carpentier observes in the first installment.

25The five articles were published at two-week to month-long intervals between October 9 and December 17, 1939.
One places oneself before one’s own things—those that were the setting of childhood and a complement to adolescent dreams—with new eyes and a spirit free from prejudice. Besides, wanderings through other lands bring to mind more than one point of reference and comparison [...]. And spurred by a new curiosity, the spectator in his own home feels impelled to revise values, to revitalize old conceptions, to visit carefully the neighborhood that long ago appeared uninteresting, to explore the street that he never crossed before. With those “new eyes and a spirit free from prejudice,” Carpentier takes up a familiar Surrealist posture as he comes to recognize the hidden code written all over Havana in elements that he and others had always considered mundane under the familiar light of reason. The numbers on lottery tickets and the names of cafés point Carpentier toward another register of truth on which a new social order might be founded.

In that regard, “Havana Seen By a Cuban Tourist” also echoes the Baudelaire poems that, as Benjamin had studied, so forcefully reverberate through the Surrealist texts. Carpentier exposes the “magic” residing in the colonial structures that draw “tourists” like him. Like the “magic cobblestones” that Baudelaire encountered in Paris, Old Havana’s buildings—and the city and the country more generally—rest on the invisible powers of the slave labor that produced them. But Carpentier’s drive “to revise values, to revitalize old conceptions,” only follows from his “wanderings through other lands.” He already gestures in 1939 toward the explicit break he would make ten years later: the full magic of modernity does not surface in every urban context but rather only in a specific place like Havana. In walking through that Latin American city born of European colonialism, two truths about the modern system magically appear: that it depends on forced labor as well as on the obfuscation of that dependence.

Thus, the first passages of “Havana Seen By a Cuban Tourist” already encapsulate the key paradox of Carpentier’s 1949 prologue: his ability to differentiate forms of “the marvelous American reality” and of its “magic” stems from the modern European aesthetic modes with which he purportedly breaks. The Carteles series shows that Carpentier, in positioning himself as “the spectator in his own home,” could only recognize the hidden truths in his formative environment and about himself through distance from them (“one places oneself before one’s own things” after “wandering through other lands”). Still, what compels him “to revise values” is his adoption of Europe’s “old conceptions” through which to understand Havana and its people. In this way, Carpentier assumes the classic posture of twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse. In 1939, he already begins to turn to a displacing magic born of displacement. His paradoxical reliance on ostensibly displaced modern terms in claiming a different modernity for Latin America repeats the defining double-gesture of the discourse of displacing magic.

What is most unique in Carpentier’s case is the timing of the change. In the rest of this chapter and the sections of the dissertation that follow, I show that by 1939—when Carpentier returned to Havana—the ambivalent shift in positions toward the European avant-garde was already firmly in place in Cuban intellectual discourse. The textual exchange between Lachatañeré and Ortiz—carried out around the same time as Carpentier’s Carteles series, immediately after Lachatañeré had taken flight from Havana—indicates that by the late 1930s other Cuban intellectuals had preceded Carpentier in trying to reconfigure the avant-garde quest for socially transforming experiences as a new politics of culture. Carpentier would codify the move in The Kingdom of This World and its prologue, but during the later 1930s other Cuban intellectuals took up magic—implicitly in some cases and
explicitly in others—in searching for the magic of ‘authentic’ presentations of Latin American historical and cultural realities.

4.

Despite his expressed sense of intellectual and spiritual rejuvenation upon his 1939 homecoming, Carpentier’s experience after his return to Havana is marked by dislocation. It would take Carpentier’s various physical displacements for him arrive by the late 1940s at the critically displacing formulations of Europe’s “cheap magicians” with his own textual magic. He remained in Cuba until 1945, when he moved to Caracas to begin the work in public relations with Publicidad Ars. He returned to Cuba only occasionally over the next fourteen years until his return to the island in 1959, shortly after the Revolution, in order to direct some book fairs planned in 1958 by the Peru-based Organización Continental de los Festivales del Libro [Continental Organization for Festivals of Books]. 27 During the 1940s—with Havana and then Caracas as home base—Carpentier traveled throughout Latin America, in some cases for extended periods. He further explored Cuba, especially its eastern sections in and around Santiago. In 1943, he took the trip to Haiti during which—if his 1949 prologue is to be believed—he suddenly perceived the marvelous American reality. 28 In 1944 he

27 See González-Echevarría 1990: 213f. for details on Carpentier’s 1959 return to Cuba. In August 1961, he was named executive director of Cuba’s Editorial Nacional [National Publishing House]. In 1967, Carpentier moved to Paris as a cultural attaché for the Cuban government. In an ironic—but perhaps telling—twist on his deep but ambivalent relations with that city of his and his parents’ youths, he maintained his primary residence there until his death in 1980.

28 According to interviews and press clippings, Carpentier joined the French actor Louis Jouvet and his company on its tour of Haiti. The Haïti-Journal reported in late December of 1943 on two lectures that Carpentier, identified as “Cultural Attaché of the Government of Havana,” delivered at the Paramount Theater in Port-au-Prince on “The Cultural Evolution of Latin America” (González-Echevarría 1990: 101n10).
traveled through Mexico on vacation. In 1947 and again in 1948 he undertook prolonged research trips along the Orinoco River and through the jungles of Venezuela.

Still, with all of his movement between locales during the 1940s, perhaps Carpentier’s most significant transition was his original passage to France in 1928. That initial dislocation was spurred by national and international events that transformed Cuban society and made it much different in 1939 than it had been when Carpentier left eleven years earlier. His move to France constituted a self-imposed exile from Cuba during a period when Gerardo Machado, carried to the Presidency in 1924 on a wave of populism, made his decisive moves to consolidate power. Carpentier—known primarily as a journalist at the time—had been a founding member of a group of anti-Machado leftist intellectuals based around Revista de Avance [The Avant Review], a journal founded in 1927 that proclaimed its avant-garde allegiances in its title and initiated active protest against the government. Most of the Avance intellectuals also aligned themselves with the more directly political Grupo Minorista [Traders’ or Retailers’ Group], formed in May 1927 around the charismatic young activist Rubén Martínez Villena. Due to his open involvement in some cultural and political protests against Machado during 1927, Carpentier spent around forty days in jail. Upon his release, he decided that a temporary leave from Cuba would be in his best interest, and he took advantage of family ties and professional connections to resettle in Paris as a

29For history of and selection from Revista de Avance, see Casanovas 1965. Ripoll 1964 offers additional historical perspective. Carpentier was a founding member of the journal’s board but, citing “professional incompatibilities,” resigned after the publication of the first issue (Casanovas 1965: 8-9).

30For more on the Grupo Minorista, see Cairo Ballester 1978. Luis E. Aguilar (1972) also discusses Revista de Avance and Grupo Minorista.
correspondent for Latin American and French cultural reviews. From this perspective, Carpentier’s cycles of departure from and return to Cuba—those physical dislocations tied up with critical displacements—would mirror the experience of many of his intellectual compatriots. Even if the length of Carpentier’s time away from the island was unusual among his contemporaries, his 1928 flights to and from Cuba turned out to be a sign of the times.

5.

The early 1920s marked a time of growing economic, political, and social turbulence in Cuba. Many of those developments evolved within what Antonio Benítez-Rojo has called “the discourse of sugar.” While the sugar industry had stood for centuries at the center of the Cuban economy—and, in turn, of the island’s politics and culture—the opening decades of the twentieth century marked a distinct change in sugar production and its consequences. While Cuba had gained political independence in 1902 after three years as a U.S. protectorate, control of the island’s economy clearly remained in the hands of the North American companies that owned the majority of Cuban sugar mills. By 1927, about eighty-two percent of the sugar production on the island came from U.S.-owned centrales, the

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31 From the start of his career, Carpentier was recognized as an accomplished musician and expert on music and its history. Some of his best-known nonfictional work—such as the groundbreaking La música en Cuba [Music in Cuba] (1946)—includes musicology. Various critics (e.g. González Echevarría 1990: 103-5) point to the importance of Carpentier’s research on the history and forms of Cuban music for his 1946 book as pivotal to the development of The Kingdom of This World and the marvelous-realist position outlined in its prologue.


33 Benítez-Rojo defines and discusses “the discourse of sugar” in a number of articles, some of which appear in his collection, The Repeating Island (1996). For a useful overview of the impact of the discourse of sugar on Cuban intellectual production during the 1920s and 1930s, see Vera Kutsinski’s Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism (1993: 134-162).
enormous manufacturing networks into which smaller, Cuban-owned farms had been consolidated (Benjamin 1990: 69n37). The expansion of North American holdings remained controversial among Cubans leading up to and during World War I, yet the soaring price of sugar on the international market during this period—coupled with the increasing vigilance of the U.S. military presence—helped to keep the situation from erupting into violence. But as prices began to fluctuate and then settle downward during the 1920s, political conflicts intensified and spilled out into civil society.34 The presidential election of 1924 arose amidst the intensifying polarization and marked a clear shift in Cuba’s political tides. The election put Machado in the executive office, where he remained for nearly a decade. Machado’s entrenchment in power soon gained a proper name of its own: the “Machadato.” The naming signals that a major political development soon became a defining social and cultural experience.

Machado had emerged quite suddenly during the early 1920s as a political force. He moved up quickly through the Cuban military to the rank of general by taking advantage of internecine disputes within military and political camps and by cultivating his image as a charming, self-made populist. Machado won the 1924 presidential election handily, earning a popular mandate for a nationalist platform that promised the reform of political institutions and the expansion of social programs in the face of the island’s ongoing economic turbulence. He initially seemed committed to that agenda after assuming the presidency of the Republic in May 1925, but by 1928 he made clear his intentions to retain power, regardless of his repeated insistence that he would not run for reelection in order to advance

34Sugar prices soared to almost twelve cents per pound in 1919, fluctuated around nine or ten cents during various boom-and-bust cycles of the 1920s, and then spiraled below two cents a pound in 1931 and, finally, fell under one cent in 1932-33 (Benjamin 1990: 69).
his agenda instead of his political career. In direct opposition to public opinion and to his reformist campaign, Machado began systematically to consolidate his power by forcing constitutional revisions that increased instead of ameliorated executive authority. His accumulation of self-assigned titles that far exceeded his constitutional role (e.g. Salvador de la Patria [Savior of the Fatherland], Primer Obrero de Cuba [Cuba’s First Worker]) reflected a more profound accrual of power.

For many observers, Machado’s defining act came in 1928 when he essentially outlawed existing political parties and created a *de facto* one-party puppet government under a forced reorganization euphemistically called “cooperativismo” [cooperativism]. Instead of real political cooperation, cooperativismo catalyzed short- and long-term trends in exactly the opposite direction.\(^{35}\) Cuban society became palpably more polarized between a small minority that directly benefited from the President’s patronage and the great majority infuriated by, among other developments, the institutional deepening of the political favoritism that Machado had pledged to purge.

In the wake of cooperativismo, political opposition to the Machadato profoundly radicalized.\(^{36}\) In turn, political radicalization contributed to a wave of tumultuous reactions and counter-reactions, compressed most forcefully and symbolically in Machado’s resignation in August 1933. A leftist alliance, aided by urban guerrilla tactics, had put enormous strain on the Machadato, and the U.S. put the final pressure on Machado to step down. A “Provisional Government” led by Manuel de Céspedes lasted less than a month,

\(^{35}\)The literature on the Machadato in general and on cooperativismo in particular is wide. I draw especially on Aguilar 1972, Pérez-Stable 2005, and Masó 1998.

\(^{36}\)As indicated in the subtitle (*Prologue to Revolution*) of *Cuba 1933*, Aguilar (1972) argues that political polarization and radicalization during the Machadato created the ideological and structural foundations for the emergence and eventual success of the Castro-led revolutionary movement of the 1950s.
followed by the four-month tenure of a “Revolutionary Government” headed by Ramón Grau San Martín. By mid-January of 1934, the Revolutionary Period was already done and another defining era in Cuban history was underway.

That new era, beginning in 1934, was ‘the age of Batista.’ Fulgencio Batista—another charming young military man who, like Machado before him, used populist rhetoric and temporary alliances to rapidly consolidate his power—had been named head of the military after Machado’s downfall. As the Revolutionary Government floundered, Batista situated himself as the United States’ main contact and best political hope. With the Government’s collapse, Batista was able to move in as the head of a more conservative, U.S.-backed opposition front that displaced Grau and installed Carlos Hevia as Provisional President. When certain military and political factions objected to Hevia, Batista helped place Carlos Mendieta as the new President two days later. Batista himself would not assume the Presidency until 1940, but he remained the primary force in Cuban political affairs until his infamous overthrow by Fidel Castro’s Revolutionary Forces almost exactly twenty-five years later.\(^{37}\)

However, as the eventual triumph of the Revolutionary Forces indicates, Batista’s hold on power was never absolute. Ramón Grau San Martín, the head of the short-lived Revolutionary Government of 1933, won the Presidency in a free election in 1944 on an anti-U.S. platform. Carlos Prío succeeded Grau San Martín in 1948 with initial independence from Batista.\(^{38}\) While Batista maintained control of the military throughout the period, he

\(^{37}\)As head of Cuba’s military, Batista exercised considerable control over the administrations of Mendieta (1934-1937) and his successor, Federico Laredo Bru (1937-1940).

\(^{38}\)In a bloodless coup in March 1952, Batista took over the Presidency again and cancelled the pending elections. He remained Head of Government until his flight from Cuba on New Year’s Eve of 1959.
always depended largely upon the Cuban public’s general acquiescence to his power.

Castro’s success resulted from the fact that, by the mid-1950s, most Cubans had come to see
the regime as more of a detriment than a benefit. Especially during the first decade under
Batista’s control, much of the island’s population tolerated the situation because of the sense
of stability it provided.

It was that palpable desire for political calm that settled over Cuba after the turmoil of
the late Machadato and the political transitions of 1933 and amidst the new turbulence that
rocked international affairs throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s. Of course, Cuba’s
economic, political, and social crises during the 1920s and 1930s had not occurred in a
vacuum. Developments on the island tied in with complex and volatile global affairs of a
period marked by the fallout of one World War and building toward another. The U.S.
economic boom of the 1920s; the Great Depression that followed; the rise of European
fascism and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War: these and other developments played out
profoundly in Cuba too and reverberated especially among Cuban intellectuals.

6.

Batista was notoriously dismissive of intellectuals, and many politically active figures
found themselves closed out of traditional politics after the collapse of the Revolutionary
Government in January 1934. The failure of that government also created considerable
disillusionment among the intellectual elite that had helped to define and then to lead the
exhilarating but fleeting political experiment. As usual, Ortiz was exemplary, in various
senses of the term. His experience was outstanding in certain respects but, more
fundamentally, it reflected a common pattern among Cuban intellectuals at the time. From
the very start of his career, Ortiz had been tied up in political service. He began work as a consul in Spain, France and Italy in 1903, when his own professional life and that of the Cuban Republic were both brand new. After his return to Cuba in 1906, he remained active in public affairs. He was a visible, prolific, and respected commentator on domestic and international political developments, and as a professor of criminal law at the University of Havana he participated frequently on government commissions regarding social policy. In 1916, he won a seat as a member of the Liberal Party in the National Congress. Amidst the growing socio-economic crises that would eventually sweep Machado to victory in 1924, Ortiz was already growing disillusioned with politics. In 1922, he did not run for reelection on the grounds that his cultural and scholarly endeavors offered more effective means of political intervention than involvement in government.  

Nevertheless, Ortiz joined in the opposition protests leading up to the 1924 elections, such that the Liberal Party asked him to join the House of Representatives again that year as a specially appointed member. He accepted, but by 1926 he could no longer stomach his involvement in Cuba’s “squalid political structure.” He renounced his seat once again—this time leaving government for good—and took Machado in particular to task for his now-obvious intentions to backtrack on his original promises of institutional reform.  

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39 For instance, in renouncing his political involvements upon the expiration of his term in 1923, Ortiz insisted that “to reconstruct the history of Cuba based on the precise knowledge of its ethnic, demographic, and cultural foundations” would more profoundly transform Cuban society by bypassing “its squalid political structure.” He went on to argue for more developed approaches to the study of “Cuban culture,” in which an “age-old bonfire” of struggle continued to light the way to a truer “freedom” than the limited political independence won after the 1898 end of Spanish colonialism (Ortiz 1923: 208f).

40 Following Machado’s victory in 1924, Ortiz—like many left-leaning intellectuals—expressed hope about the possibilities of political reform. As many historians have noted, Machado initially appeared to move in a reformist direction, and one of his first moves was the formation of a Presidential Comisión Codificadora [Policy Commission] charged with rewriting Cuba’s criminal code. Machado tapped Ortiz as the obvious choice to lead this project, and Ortiz worked tirelessly over the next year and a half to produce the Proyecto de Código Criminal Cubano [Project for the Cuban Criminal Code]. In presenting the Código Criminal to the Presidential
became one of the most vocal critics of Machado and of Cuban political institutions. Within four years, Ortiz could tolerate the situation no more. He declared that Machado’s elimination of political opposition in 1928 under the euphemistic guise of “cooperativismo” had enabled open “despotism,” and in 1931 he went into self-imposed exile in Washington, D.C. He moved to New York in 1933 to join a group of exiles sympathetic to the political resistance back home and calling themselves the Cuban Revolutionary Front. From the U.S., Ortiz campaigned for international isolation of Machado’s dictatorship. After the overthrow of Machado in August 1933, Ortiz returned to Havana. But he left the task of government to others. In reflecting more than eight years later on his life in politics, Ortiz remained unequivocal about his previous political involvements. “I had the misfortune of getting mixed up in politics,” he concluded (Ortiz 1998: 21).  

Fittingly, Ortiz offered this assessment in the midst of his famous 1942 Club Atenas speech “On the Cuban Integration of Blacks and Whites.” After all, that talk was both a genealogy of and a manifesto for Afro-Cuban studies. It was precisely scholarly and cultural endeavors to which Ortiz and his intellectual compatriots largely returned after 1933. So whether by conscious withdrawal or external exclusion from political affairs, most Cuban intellectuals in 1934 and in the years that followed made the same move as Ortiz: they conceded the political sphere to Batista. They focused instead on intellectual interventions carried out in the name of “culture.”

Commission in 1926, Ortiz introduced it as the result of “the effort of all, drawing on the reformist impulse of General Machado, who is very interested in legislative renovation.” The project did not win Congressional approval as the political tides began to shift away from reform in 1926, but his Código Criminal earned immediate and lasting fame as outstandingly progressive. For instance, Enrico Ferri—the famed Italian criminologist who had mentored Ortiz during 1903—declared, “the foundation of the Project for the Criminal Code of Cuba constitutes a magnificent and excellent affirmation of the principle of social defense.” For an illuminating discussion of Ortiz’s Código Criminal and its context, see Bronfman 2005.

41For a helpful overview of Ortiz’s political activities through his return to Cuba in 1933, see Almodóvar 2005.
The turn—or, rather, return—of Cuban intellectuals to culture was not necessarily a move of last resort. For Ortiz and his colleagues, “culture” had been the primary sphere of action all along. As Consuelo Naranjo Orovio and Miguel Angel Puig-Samper Mulero have suggested, invocations of “culture” within early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse generally reflected notions of the term within contemporary social science (2005: 22f). Despite significant differences among fields of social science, they shared an underlying post-Kantian assumption: Because of their unique powers of reason, humans were simultaneously part of and separated from the rest of the world. Humans acted in the world, but their actions worked on it and altered it. Therefore, “culture” encompassed all human endeavors that, whether deliberate or not, transformed the “natural” state of world. “Culture” also helped constitute “society,” that is, the system of relations between humans. From this perspective, “politics”—in its limited connotation of processes and mechanisms of government—was only an integral part of the broader “cultural” and “social” spectrums. Similarly, “culture” was inherently “political” in a wider sense. In its more expansive meaning, “politics” referred in this discourse to the mechanisms by which groups of different sizes tried to constitute—or reconstitute—the state of “social” relations.

Cuban intellectuals developed these social scientific concepts from working with various sources. For instance, the ethnological work of Franz Boas—grounded in an explicitly post-Kantian theorization of “culture” and the attendant notion of “folklore”—circulated widely and gained popularity with Latin American intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century. For Ortiz, the meaning of “culture” stemmed most directly from the
Krauspositivist social scientific traditions in which he had been trained in Spain. The hallmark of those traditions was the idea that education functioned as a foundational political mechanism by which “culture” could be directed and “society” could be determined.\(^\text{42}\) In the Spanish context, this Krauspositivist emphasis on education surfaced as the driving force behind a perceived need for the “regeneration” of a “Hispanic” society that had lost its moral bearings under the “decadence” of nineteenth-century Spanish imperialism. Accordingly, “culture” often played out under the banner of “regenerationist” programs that imagined the revitalization of a “Pan-Hispanic culture” united by history, language, and religion.

Ortiz’s Spanish background and education gave him a uniquely intimate familiarity with these ideas. But, again, his particular experience contributed to a typically Cuban reaction. Already in the first decade of the 1900s—as Cubans were trying to establish the independence of their Republic on political and non-political terms—Ortiz and others had staked out their own, alternative “regenerationist” position. They too called from the revitalization of Cuban society through narrowly “political” and broadly “cultural” means like education, but Cuban intellectuals rejected the idea that theirs was part of a “Pan-Hispanic culture.” Rather, they sought to reaffirm the independence of “Cuban culture” in the past, present, and future. Politics—narrowly conceived—would function as a key part of that effort, but present cultural endeavors—such as scholarly investigations into Cuba’s cultural past—also would critically define the nation’s future culture and, ultimately, its social relations.

It was within this tradition of Cuban intellectual activism that Ortiz insisted in 1923 that “culture” served as the “age-old bonfire” to light Cuba’s way toward a more viable

\(^{42}\text{Refer to the introduction for more on Krauspositivism and its influence on Ortiz.}\)
“freedom” (Ortiz 1923: 208f). Ortiz’s statement, made in a speech to Cuba’s Academia de Historia (Academy of History), reflects how political progressivism of the 1920s germinated within scholarly organizations and cultural associations. It made sense that intellectual activity would sprout once again from those kinds of institutions after 1933.

8.

The Revista Bimestre Cubana [Bimonthly Cuban Review] served as the logical center for renewed politics of culture. The Revista Bimestre was the principal publication of one of Cuba’s oldest and most influential intellectual forums, La Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País [The Economic Society of Friends of the Nation], which had been founded in 1793 as a bastion for Enlightenment thinking in the Spanish colonies. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the Society stood as the institutional center for Cuba’s great liberal causes—ranging from abolition to independence to 1920s reformism—by providing space and resources for exchange among sympathetic intellectuals, Cuban and non-Cuban alike. The Society—popularly known by the acronym SEAP—had initiated publication of the Revista Bimestre in the early 1900s as a medium for social, political, and economic ideas—and, hence, “for the diffusion of culture”—in the new Republic.

In 1910, Ortiz took over responsibility for the editorial direction of the Revista Bimestre (a responsibility he would maintain until 1959). Upon his return to Cuba and in the wake of the collapse of the Revolutionary Government, Ortiz emphasized the role that the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País and other intellectual organizations should play in post-1933 Cuba. He explained that the organizations could nurture national culture at an uncertain moment in Cuba’s history by undertaking new scholarly investigations into the
island’s past and present. Such scholarship, as exploration into and expression of “Cuban culture,” should reemerge as the primary realm of social intervention. He promised that SEAP would lead the way in initiating new cultural endeavors and that its Revista Bimestre would publish them.

In making a commitment to this cause, Ortiz undertook a research project to serve as a model. The result was an important series of articles that eventually included four pieces appearing one-a-year between 1934 and 1937. The first three pieces were published in Revista Bimestre. In a telling sign of how Cuban intellectual cultural politics developed after 1933, Ortiz would incorporate the fourth study into his January 1937 inaugural address to the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies, and the article would serve as the centerpiece of the first issue of the new Society’s journal.

Taken as a whole, the articles comprised a multifaceted exploration of a significant cultural development of the late 1920s and early 1930s, a trend that Ortiz would identify as poesía mulata [mulatto poetry]. Ortiz’s use of that designation offers an immediate indication of the reformulated intellectual position that emerged after 1933. As Ortiz made clear in the first article, “mulatto poetry” reflected cultural formations that undermined notions of race. According to Ortiz, the poems themselves were “mulatto,” not the authors. Ortiz’s main point across the poesía mulata series was to delineate the poems’ mixture of formal elements—such as vocabulary and rhythm—as well as modes of thought from African as well as European traditions. He focused mainly on the work of Cubans but also extended his analysis—and the category of poesía mulata—to include other Spanish-speaking Caribbean
writers who incorporated African elements into their work. He identified Luis Palés Matos, a Puerto Rican, as an outstanding poeta mulato (mulatto poet).43

By establishing the “mulatto” nature of the poems, Ortiz reinforced the critical claim that Caribbean—and especially Cuban—culture had been and always would amount to unique historical expressions structured by the peculiar colonial past that forced together so many diverse elements. “Poesía mulata” functioned as another of Ortiz’s cubanismos. The designation tried to unsettle the concept of race by pushing racial terms onto poetry that technically, as a non-biological entity, could belong to no “race.” Rather, the idea of race was itself an element of culture, a fallacious category superimposed by human reason onto a confusing world and thereby altering society. For Ortiz, poesía mulata exposed the race-concept as an aesthetic production, as part of the domain of fiction. And in unveiling the cultural parameters of race, poesía mulata—and the scholarly exploration of that field of literature—offered ripe possibilities for dramatic intervention.

Ortiz laid down these themes in the first article, which appeared at the end of 1934 in SEAP’s Revista Bimestre under the title “La poesía mulata: Presentación de Eusebia Cosme, la recitadora” [Mulatto Poetry: Presentation by Eusebia Cosme, the Reciter]. In his opening study of poesía mulata, he outlined the contours of the genre by emphasizing the poems’ increased impact in oral renderings. He suggested that the work of Eusebia Cosme—who had

43 Palés Matos (1898-1959) is a pivotal figure in the development of Afro-Caribbean studies. Critics often recognize his 1926 poem, “Pueblo negro” [Black Village], as the beginning of the “negrismo” movement in the Spanish Antilles. In a move that observers continue to make regularly, Ortiz paired Palés Matos with Nicolás Guillén as the main pillars of the “Afro-Antillean” movement that earned wide attention during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Like Guillén, Palés Matos—who also had partial African ancestry—drew criticism for creating exotic stereotypes of Afro-Caribbean traditions and eventually abandoned “negrismo” pursuits for more openly political verse. Most of Palés Matos’s “Afro-Antillean” poems are collected in his famous 1937 book, Tuntún de pasa y grifería [Drumbeats of Kinkiness and Blackness] (Palés Matos 1993). For more on Palés Matos, including introductions in English, see Kutzinski 1993, Marzán 1995, and Ruscalleda Bercedóniz 2005.
gained renown in Cuba with her dramatic recitations—advanced *poesía mulata* even more than the original poems that she performed. Ortiz explained how Cosme’s recitations animated the poems as unique cultural expressions and, in so doing, generated social effects among her audience that surpassed the original written versions. “Culture,” he suggested, unfolded as an ongoing performance, and Cosme’s dramatic interpretations transformed the culture they ostensibly expressed. Her performances functioned as a powerful political mechanism. Ortiz developed these themes across the other three articles in the series: “Los últimos versos mulatos” [The latest mulatto verse] (1935); “Más acerca de la poesía mulata, escorzos para un estudio” [Another look at *poesía mulata*: Sketches of a study] (1936); and “Religión en la poesía mulata” [Religion in *poesía mulata*] (1937).

Significantly, the last article ended where the first one began: by considering the social effects of Eusebia Cosme’s dramatic recitations. Yet, in the later piece Ortiz would come at the issue directly through magic in the hopes of letting loose a displacing magic modeled on Cosme’s performances. In the next chapter, I will return to that final, critical move in Ortiz’s *poesía mulata* series. The arc between those two different discussions of Cosme’s work—one in 1934, the other in 1937—traces a shifting politics of culture in and beyond Ortiz’s work during that two-and-a-half-year period. Still, Ortiz’s *poesía mulata* series developed within the confines of scholarly organizations clustered around the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País and the *Revista Bimestre Cubana*. The conditions of the project’s production serve as a reminder that the evolving cultural politics of the 1930s played out primarily within the sphere of intellectual institutions.

9.
For a variety of reasons, institutionally based Cuban intellectual politics intensified considerably during 1936. By that time, many of the intellectuals who had left Cuba during the turbulence surrounding Machado’s fall had returned to the island. After two years under the Batista-influenced Mendieta administration, life seemingly had regained a measure of political, economic, and social stability for many Cubans. But, of course, that sense of calm at home differed markedly from—and, to some extent, stemmed from—the growing turmoil abroad. Demand for Cuban sugar once again increased as sectors of the international supply shifted or closed.

And then, in July of 1936, the simmering tensions in Spain erupted into a full-scale civil war. The outbreak of that conflict impacted Cuban intellectual life in a profound and decisive manner. The ties between Spain and its former colonial jewel were much more than historical. The flow of Spaniards to Cuba—whether as short-term visitors or long-term residents—remained consistently heavy, even after Spain’s 1898 loss of the colony. Spaniards remained a familiar part of Cuban society, including its intellectual circles. Not surprisingly, the flow continued to move the other way too. Even after 1898, many Cubans with the means to do so followed the familiar colonial tradition of traveling to Spain and, quite frequently, of taking up temporary or permanent residence there. A majority of Cubans arguably had some Spanish ancestry and, in many cases, maintained contact with relatives in Spain and its territories. Ortiz stood out in this regard too. His mother hailed from the island of Minorca, one of the Balearic Islands off of the coast of the Spanish region of Catalonia, and Ortiz had spent most of the first fifteen years of his life there and much of the next five years in Barcelona (where he completed his university degree) and in Madrid (where he completed his doctorate in law). Therefore, for Ortiz and many others in Cuba, the political
violence in Spain before, during, and after the 1936 outbreak of the Civil War hit home in literal as well as figurative ways.

In light of the circumstances in Spain, Ortiz and other intellectuals in Cuba intensified efforts to revive a previously established organization, the Institución Hispano-Cubana de Cultura (IHCC) [Hispanic-Cuban Cultural Institution]. The IHCC had originally emerged out of the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País in November 1926. In a November 12 lecture at the SEAP, Ortiz proposed the formation of the IHCC, and only ten days later it was officially established with the professed goal of “endeavoring to increase the intellectual relations between Spain and Cuba through the exchange between scientists, artists, students, the founding of professorships, and publicizing activities geared toward the intensification and diffusion of our own [Cuban] culture” (SEAP 1926: 896).

From the beginning of 1927 through the end of 1930, the IHCC actively and productively pursued those objectives. The group managed to secure donations from and special agreements with private sources, including Spanish social and cultural organizations like the Casino Español and the Institución Cultural Española de Buenos Aires [Buenos Aires Spanish Cultural Institution], the publisher Cultural, the retailer Fin de Siglo, and the steamship company Transatlántica Española. The IHCC also forged productive collaborations with institutions in Cuba, Spain, and elsewhere. The University of Havana and the Junta para la Ampliación de Estudios e Investigaciones Científicas [Committee for the Growth of Scientific Studies and Investigations] (JAE) in Madrid agreed to house courses and lectures offered by visiting intellectuals to Cuba and to Spain, respectively, while the

44For a brief history of and background on the IHCC, see Naranjo Orovio and Puig-Samper Mulero 2005: 24-31. In the following pages, I draw on Naranjo Orovio and Puig-Samper’s discussion, based on their original archival research.
Spanish Cultural Institutes in New York and Mexico City, the Hispanic Institute of New York, the Instituto Hispano-Mexicano de Intercambio Universitario [the Hispanic-Mexican Exchange Institution], the University of Puerto Rico, and organizations in other parts of Latin America supported joint activities and exchanges.

This network of relations resulted in an exchange program that, in 1927 alone, brought physicist Fernando de los Ríos, chemist Blas Cabrera, and infectious-disease specialist Luis Sayé to Cuba from Spain for lecture series. In turn, Rita Shelton, a Cuban medical researcher, and Arsenio Roa, an economist, traveled to Barcelona and Madrid, respectively, to work with counterparts in Spain. Over the next three years, the exchanges expanded further to include many notable programs, such as two annual scholarships for Cubans in Spain and lecture tours of Cuba by two of Spain’s most prominent contemporary intellectuals, the literary historian Américo Castro (in 1928) and the writer Federico García Lorca (in March 1930).

In 1928, the Institution inaugurated its main journal, Mensajes de la Institución Hispanocubana de Cultura [Messages of the Hispanic-Cuban Cultural Institution], followed in 1930 by the monthly Surco. Cuba’s most popular daily, Diario de la Marina, substantially increased the IHCC’s public profile by agreeing to announce and review the organization’s proceedings. However, shortly after the launch of Surco, the activities of the IHCC came to a virtual standstill. As Ortiz and others fled Cuba under the tightening grip of the Machadato, the IHCC’s administration and membership dried up. During Ortiz’s absence between 1931 and 1933, the IHCC did manage to organize a few isolated lectures by scholars who already resided in Cuba, but the group was unable to carry out any exchange programs and even had to cancel planned visits by several Spanish figures. When Ortiz and other intellectuals
returned to Cuba after Machado’s fall, funding remained limited and, like most other intellectual organizations, the IHCC remained mostly dormant.

However, by 1936 the IHCC had regrouped and began to show signs of new life. The organization’s reemergence reflected the wider move toward institutionally grounded intellectual activity after 1933 and resulted directly from Ortiz’s effort to use the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País as the initial staging ground for a revitalized cultural politics. On May 24, 1936, the IHCC, under the auspices of SEAP, sponsored its first lecture by a visiting Spaniard in five years. In a talk entitled “The Significance of the Spanish Revolution,” Félix Gordón Ordás, the Spanish ambassador to Cuba, spoke about the victory in the recent February elections of the leftist Popular Front.

Ordás’s optimism in that talk was questionable and, ultimately, proved short-lived. After the February election, the Popular Front pushed through a ban on the right-wing Falange Party, and the move transformed the tensions of the campaigns into the first of the waves of armed confrontation that would ensue over the next three years in streets and countrysides across Spain and its territories. March, April, and May had been marked by street riots in parts of the country, and then, in July, came the military uprisings in Spanish Morocco and in some places at home. By September, a military junta had installed Franco as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Spanish Armed Forces.

With this severe turn-of-events, the IHCC’s renewal assumed added urgency, and the group quickly increased its cultural programming as a means to aid some of the flood of intellectuals trying to escape Franco’s Nationalist forces in Spain.45 In light of the

45Among the Spaniards that the IHCC directly aided were: the poet Juan Ramón Jiménez and his wife, Zenobia Camprubí, who arrived in Cuba in November 1936; Ramón Menéndez Pidal, who came in January 1937 and delivered a series of lectures on the history of Spanish literature; the biologist Luis Amado Blanco;
circumstances, the Institución also founded a new, Ortiz-initiated journal, *Ultra*, which would remain a fixture on the intellectual scene until it gave way in 1947. As Ortiz outlined in the section “Afirmaciones de Cultura” [Affirmations of Culture] that appeared in *Ultra’s* first issue and that became one of the journal’s regular features, the IHCC and its new publication would confront urgent domestic and international affairs as a much-needed forum through which to cultivate “tolerance.” Ortiz explained: “Without mutual tolerance, which is the livening factor behind culture, science is reduced to chatter, religion to sterile ‘fanaticism,’ justice to oppressive despotism, and the power behind social rhythm turns into a suffocating, repelling beast” (Ortiz 1936b: 79, as quoted in Ortiz Herrera 2005: 7).

Ortiz’s invocation of “the livening factor behind culture,” along with the chosen heading “Affirmations of Culture,” signal the cultural politics at work in *Ultra*. The journal formalized the ideas behind Ortiz’s *poesía mulata* studies. “Culture” emerged clearly as the primary sphere of intellectual engagement. Ortiz’s statement, with its references to “sterile ‘fanaticism’” and “oppressive despotism,” overtly addressed global political dynamics and set up “culture” as the counterforce to the dangerous “power behind social rhythm [that] turns into a suffocating, repelling beast.” Apparently, Ortiz’s politics of “culture” had more than Cuban affairs in its sights. Its target was nothing less than human intolerance and its manifestations in fascism abroad. That project of worldwide social transformation would

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46 On the significance of *Ultra* during its run from 1936 to 1947, María Fernanda Ortiz Herrera (Ortiz’s daughter) writes: “I do not know of any other magazine in any language that can be compared to *Ultra* as to useful information, interesting material, and universal cultural values for the general reader. There is nothing like it published in English […]. In 1939, Stella Clemence, a writer and a book fan, director of the Harkness Collection and the Latin American section of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., referred to *Ultra* in the following terms: ‘I encourage you to read these messages by Fernando Ortiz and the content and diversity of the articles published in *Ultra*. I believe that the real value of Ortiz’s scholarship lays there, reflected in his work and his teachings’” (Ortiz Herrera 2005: 7).
require other new intellectual institutions related to but different from SEAP and the *Revista Bimestre* and from the IHCC and *Ultra*.

10.

On June 1, 1936—one week after the May 24 reinauguration of the Instituto Hispano-Cubana de Cultura with Ambassador Ordás’s talk—Ortiz and a number of other prominent intellectuals gathered in Havana to draft the statutes of another new intellectual organization spurred by the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País. The new endeavor would pursue a particular aspect of the critical drive toward the “diffusion of culture.” Specifically, the group would revolve around scholarly exploration into the “African” legacy in Cuban history and in the island’s contemporary culture. Given that expressed purpose, the appropriate name for the organization seemed obvious: La Sociedad de Estudios Africubanos [The Society for Afro-Cuban Studies].

But what does a name really say? In this case, the clarity of the choice was telling. For, as already discussed, the term “Afro-Cuban” was not timeless; it only took hold slowly in the decades following Ortiz’s 1906 original use of the term and leading up to the group’s formation. Accordingly, the notion of “Afro-Cuban studies” was also something of a novelty during those years. The fact that a group of intellectuals formally adopted the designation for the first time in 1936 indicates that, as Ortiz would highlight in his 1942 speech, his “Afro-Cuban” *cubanismos*—with their intentions of unsettling established categories—had settled by the mid-1930s into “common parlance.”

47 Key information about the formation of the Society appears in “Notas y Noticias” at the beginning of the inaugural issues (1937-1938) of the group’s journal. See Sociedad de Estudios Africubanos 1937.
It was perhaps in recognition of the potential power of names that when the Spanish Civil War exploded the next month, the group began to consider a longer designation that would leave no doubts about the organization’s interventionist intentions. By the time the founding members approved for release the group’s first public statement on December 26 of 1936, they had agreed to lengthen the organization’s official name to La Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos Contra los Racismos (The Society for Afro-Cuban Studies Against Racism). In a document proclaiming its “advertencia, comprensión y designio” [announcement, understanding, and purpose], the Society insisted that its ostensibly narrow historical and cultural focus had immediate relevance to contemporary global affairs. The manifesto-style pronouncement—addressed “to Cubans and their fellow citizens”—explained how global affairs had created an urgent need for so-called “Afro-Cuban studies”:

The social attitude of reciprocal ignorance, when not from open antipathy and hostility among the various racial elements that make up a population, is very frequent throughout the entire world, especially when it corresponds to a correlative economic structure, and could not help but present itself in Cuba. All of humanity is suffering profoundly from the absurd prejudice of racial hatred, obscuring the play of other truer and more transcendent factors. (Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos 1937: 4)

The Society “Against Racism” took it upon itself to confront the “absurd prejudice” from which “all of humanity is suffering profoundly.” “Afro-Cuban studies”—a conceivably innocuous academic endeavor with apparently world-saving potential—would serve as the group’s weapon in that confrontation.

Of course, that weapon was also magical. How could it not be? A group dedicated to Afro-Cuban studies—a field arising largely from Ortiz’s displacing magic—would rely on

48“Esta actitud social de recíproca ignorancia, cuando no de abierta antipatía y hostilidad, entre los varios elementos raciales que integran un pueblo, es muy frecuente en el mundo entero, máxime cuando corresponde a una correlativa estructura económica, y no podía dejar de presentarse en Cuba. Toda la humanidad está sufriendo profundamente por la absurda prédica de los odios raciales, disfrazando el juego de otros factores más verdaderos y trascendentes.”
some of that magic in its own efforts. So, appropriately, magic served as a key consideration in the group’s first official meeting. After proclaiming its purpose and intentions, SEAC—the acronym by which the Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos became known—set January 16th of the new year, a date a less than three weeks ahead, for its official inauguration. The event would be held at Club Atenas and would revolve around a presidential keynote address by Ortiz. Since he almost was finished the fourth of his studies of poesía mulata, Ortiz decided that the presentation of that work—entitled “La religión en la poesía mulata” [Religion in poesía mulata]—would serve as an appropriate topic as well as a fitting bridge to the new SEAC from the venerable SEAP. The move symbolized that the post-1933 intellectual activity nurtured in the established Revista Bimestre Cubana had come into its own intellectually and institutionally by 1937 as reconfigured politics of “culture.”

It is to that cultural politics expressed in Ortiz’s inaugural address and embodied in the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies that I now move. As I do so, I point back to where I began this chapter: Walter Benjamin’s late 1936 call for “politicizing art” as a way to counteract “Fascism.” At almost exactly the same time, Ortiz and cohorts also looked to new forms of cultural production, already implicitly political, that could counteract “the absurd prejudice of racial hatred.” And like Benjamin, the Cuban group also turned to magic as both cause of and solution to peculiarly modern forms of ethnic tension.

Every Culture passes through the age-phases of the individual man. Each has its childhood, youth, manhood and old age.

Oswald Spengler (1918)

The three phases of religious evolution are reflected in Afro-Cuban lyric: the gods emerge, the gods triumph, the gods die. *Mana*, myth, and science. The same stained-glass window of the temple filters diverse colorations according to the sun’s position at twilight or at its zenith. *Mulatez* refracts different shades according to the angle at which the sun kisses it. Thus some will be able to see in the lyric of Pedrosó and of the poets, like him, who sing of the coming of redemptions, an essence of religiosity.

Fernando Ortiz (1937)

1.

In the late 1970s, literary critics rediscovered Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* and its profound influence on Latin American intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s. The renewed attention given by Latin Americanists to Spengler stemmed in large part from Roberto González Echevarría’s discussion in his influential 1977 study of Alejo Carpentier of the impact of *The Decline of the West* on the region’s intellectuals.49 As González Echevarría (1990: 54f) highlights in his monograph, Spengler’s ideas gained immediate and enduring traction in Latin America through José Ortega y Gasset and his *Revista de Occidente* [Review of the West]. The *Revista’s* premise was to introduce European

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49See especially the second chapter (“Lord, Praised Be Thou”) of González Echevarría 1990.
philosophy and culture to the Spanish-speaking world, and Ortega himself was particularly drawn to Spengler’s thought. He assisted Manuel García Morente’s 1923 translation of The Decline of the West, which instantly became a best seller throughout Latin America. Spengler’s view of history as a perpetual ebb and flow of unique cultural forms obviously appealed to Latin American intellectuals who found in the book a philosophical grounding for their region’s autonomy and historical import vis-à-vis “the West.”

The renewed attention to Spengler’s prominence in Latin America between the 1920s and 1940s is significant. Still, the primary value of González Echevarría’s discussion arises from his observation that Latin American interest in Ortega’s Revista del Occidente and in Spengler’s The Decline of the West reflects a broader fascination at the time with different conceptions of Kultur—“culture”—since the late eighteenth century. Spengler offered only one of a number of appealing notions of “culture,” and González Echevarría instructively points to a popular 1924 Revista del Occidente article by Francisco Vela to underscore that fact. The piece coincided with a visit by Leo Frobenius to Madrid, and Vela used the occasion to identify Frobenius’s place within a broader spectrum of related ideas:

We have then three doctrines of culture. The doctrine of progress, in which there is only one culture that advances incessantly in a single direction. The doctrine of Spengler, for whom there are multiple cultures, closed, noncommunicating, of limited life and foreseeable phases, that die and never revive again. Frobenius’s doctrine, according to which, in large territorial expanses, there exists, like a soil deposit, an unchanging reservoir of culture, a cultural predisposition; an ‘original culture’ that sometimes germinates and bears fruit in the form of temporal ‘historical’ cultures which pass as ephemeral vibrations, as a dream gives forth from itself various other dreams, to leave the earth again in its primeval stillness.50

In differentiating between these theories of culture, Vela implied that they in fact stemmed from a common seed: the post-Kantian conception of Kultur as both historical and ideal or,

50Vela 124: 393, as cited and translated in González Echevarría 1990: 54.
more precisely, as simultaneously phenomenological and transcendental. “ Cultures” — plural phenomena — were temporally situated, organic systems of human action and expression rooted in particular modes of thought and shaped by environmental and historical forces. Each of the theories figured specific “ cultures” as particular reflections of an ideal, or transcendental, “ Culture” toward which humanity collectively was striving. In other words, the progressive, Spenglerian, and Frobenian were distinct branches off of a common post-Kantian philosophical tradition. In every case, “ Culture” invoked a universal history and the critical question was how particular “ cultures” — such as those of the Americas — fit into the overarching framework.

Vela’s characterization of the “three doctrines of culture” already foregrounds the appeal of Spengler’s and Frobenius’s theories over the “ doctrine of progress.” In opposition to the claim that “ there is only one culture that advances incessantly in a single direction” (presumably toward Europe and “ the West”), Spengler’s and Frobenius’s perspectives not only allowed for cultural autonomy but also pointed to an inevitable superiority of American cultural formations at some point within the totality of history. Nevertheless, Vela’s summary of the “three doctrines” also suggests that, while the Kultur-concept held special attraction during the period, Latin American intellectuals confronted various formulations of the term. González Echevarría gives particular attention to the Spenglerian version that he considers especially relevant to Carpentier’s work during the 1920s and 1930s. But the broader implication in González Echevarría’s discussion is that, even for Carpentier, The Decline of the West was only one articulation of “ culture” among many. Accordingly, González Echevarría situates Carpentier’s project in a wider frame:

Contemporary Latin American literature is, with few exceptions, a bourgeois, post-Romantic literature, not the direct descendant of an autochthonous
By situating the popularity of *The Decline of the West* and its influence on Carpentier’s work within this context, González Echevarría’s influential ‘recovery’ of Spengler serves as a useful point of departure for a more detailed consideration of the official inauguration of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies on January 16, 1937. As explained in the last chapter, the founding members of SEAC presented both Afro-Cuban studies and the new society dedicated to that pursuit as expressions of and means to “culture.” But if SEAC’s founders seemed to draw consciously on the general notion of *Kultur*, the inaugural proceedings also revealed how the Cubans played simultaneously with the different theories in searching for the own formulations. This engagement with what González Echevarría calls “post-Romantic” notions of culture becomes especially apparent in Ortiz’s speech on the occasion. At various points in his discourse, Ortiz refers directly to Frobenius and to his notion of territorial “reservoirs of culture” that “bears fruit” as particular cultural expressions.
Throughout the speech he also makes clear references to Spengler and to other elements of continental philosophy.  

At the beginning of the talk, Ortiz frames the new Society’s efforts as a matter of culture: “The Society for Afro-Cuban Studies has to continue the task of the old liberators, putting science and art, the culture of this epoch, at its service” (Ortiz 1937a: 16). The statement is telling. In Ortiz’s rendering, SEAC’s goal is nothing less than liberation; “science and art, the culture of this epoch,” serves as the means to that end. Or, to put it another way, the goal is the fulfillment of transcendental human “Culture” realized through the particular “culture” of “science and art.” Ortiz quickly reinforces these ideas and repeats the main components of SEAC’s December 1936 “Announcement.” “Abolitionism has not ended,” he asserts. Racialist fallacies continue to govern social affairs in Cuba and around the world, and the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies has to dedicate itself to the task of universal freedom:

We should pursue the secular work that, in one and the other race, the dignified abolitionist patriarchs undertook since there is now a social subordination in effect under the pretext of color, of ancestry or of caste, that greatly exacerbates economic subjugations so that these are aggravated by false categories of race and by their misleading preconceptions. (16)  

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51 Ortiz made no secret of his interest in Spengler. In 1924—the year after García Morente’s Spanish translation of *The Decline of the West* appeared as *La decadencia del Occidente*—he explored Spenglerian themes in a talk on “la decadencia cubana” (Ortiz 1924).

52 All translations from the lecture are my own. Because I often refer back to the nuances in Ortiz’s language, I will continue to include corresponding untranslated text in footnotes. The subtleties and multiple implications of his text might also interest readers of Spanish. In this case, the original reads: “La Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos ha de continuar la faena de los viejos libertadores, poniendo la ciencia y el arte, la cultura de esta época, a su servicio.”

53 “El abolicionismo no ha terminado. Debemos proseguir la obra secular que, en una y otra raza, emprendieron los digno patricios abolicionistas, mientras haya vigente una supeditación social so pretexto de color, de abolengo o de casta, que harto lastiman las subyugaciones económicas para que éstas sean agravadas por falsas categorías de razas y por sus preconcepciones mentidas.”
These last statements indicate why, in Ortiz’s formulation of “culture,” “science” plays a defining but paradoxical role. In identifying “the culture of this epoch,” Ortiz referred more specifically to a current configuration of modernity. As one of the pillars of modern culture, science buttresses modernity’s revolutionary potential as well as its repressive realities. In the terms of Ortiz’s introductory comments, science works in the “service” of liberation but also stands as a root cause of “social subordination.” He makes this paradox clear in the next sentence: “Science, the mind’s unique but often-vacillating guide, proves that by original progeny and in the essence of spirit all men—black and white—are the same” (16). Ortiz’s implication is that, even while science “proves” the underlying equality of all “in essence of spirit,” frequent scientific vacillations also had misguided “the mind.” The “false categories of race” that Ortiz hopes science will displace had gained legitimacy under scientific pretenses. For instance, biology had lent a cover of authority to the “misleading preconceptions” that produced “social subordination […] under the pretext of color, of ancestry, or of caste.”

Thus, Ortiz’s characterization of science as “the mind’s unique but often-vacillating guide” demonstrates why reason operates as the pivot in his entire system. “Science,” “art,” and the overarching sphere of “culture” all stem from the imaginative powers of “the mind” and from its ability to reflect upon those imaginings. Rational production defines the field of “culture.” Since the concepts born of the mind can be oppressive as well as liberating, “culture” is always driven by the tensions between possibility and actuality. The still-relevant “task of the old liberators” is to produce culture that could free the potential from the actual. And, in that regard, Ortiz immediately marks off the post-Kantian boundaries of his speech

54 “La ciencia, guía a menudo vacilante pero único de la mente, prueba que los hombres por la original progenie y por la esencia del ánimo, negros y blancos, somos todos iguales.”
and of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies that the speech inaugurated. Ortiz implied that whether as “science,” as “art,” or in some other form, people constitute the social realities—the “cultures” good and bad—with which they subsequently live. Social life is structured by aesthetic—or, in Ortiz’s terms, cultural—productions.

3.

In establishing the cultural parameters of social realities, Ortiz place particular emphasis on “art,” the second pillar of “the culture of this epoch.” In the course of his speech, Ortiz figures art as SEAC’s primary means of cultural intervention in its pursuit of “the secular work that, in one or the other race, the dignified abolitionist patriarchs undertook.” To that end, Ortiz opens up his talk by framing the Society and its inception in fictional terms. He considers SEAC’s inauguration in terms of an allegory:

The peculiar character of this ceremony today—realized by a concurrence as numerous as it is significant, not only because of its values but also because of the heterogeneity of its social positions as well as of its positions and stances in the face of the future that dawns on the horizon—seems to me to resemble one of the old university ceremonies of investiture of degree in which, before the faculty and audience, the acquisition of the doctorate commemorated, more than the end of the student’s adolescence, the beginning of a life as a man prepared for civic responsibility and graduated to a new struggle, with greater capacity but with more responsibilities. (15)55

It would be hard to overstate the implications of this paragraph. Most immediately, it echoes Spengler’s outline in The Decline of the West of different periods within the development of particular cultures and of general human Kultur. “Every Culture passes through the age-

55“El carácter peculiarísmo de esta solemnidad de hoy, realizada como está por una concurrencia tan numerosa como significativa, no solo por sus valores sino por la heterogeneidad de sus posiciones sociales y la de sus posturas y militancias ante el porvenir que alborea en el horizonte, parece como una de las antiguas ceremonias universitarias de investidura de grado, en que ante el claustro y el pueblo concurrente, el doctorado celebrada, más que el fin de una adolescencia de estudiante, el inicio de una vida de hombre preparado para la responsabilidad cívica y graduado para una nueva brega; con más capacidad, pero con más deberes.”
phases of the individual man,” Spengler famously proclaimed. “Each has its childhood, youth, manhood and old age” (Spengler 1957: 107). As his reference to “the culture of this epoch” indicates, Ortiz deliberately invokes Spengler’s notion of cultural “age-phases” with his image of the “celebrated doctorate” that moves from the “adolescence of the student” to “the life of a man prepared for civic responsibility and graduated to a new struggle, with greater capacity but with more responsibilities.” Ortiz’s implications are clear: the formation of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies marked Cuba’s transition to a new, more mature stage of culture.

To reinforce this idea, Ortiz presents his personal history within the allegory of Cuba’s—and, by extension, humanity’s—maturation. In an introduction that foreshadows in content and structure the opening move he would make five years later in his famous speech from the same spot in Club Atenas, Ortiz asks his audience for their “kind permission” to indulge in “some considerations of a personal character.”

I could not initiate my public collaboration in this Society for Afro-Cuban Studies, whose members have had the generosity to make me its first President, without telling you that today is, for me, a day of profound emotion, full of gratitude that—it must be said with inevitable paradox—is also a feeling of modest pride. (15) 

He explains that the “inevitable paradox” in his mix of satisfaction and appreciation stems from the current recognition of the critical importance of his life’s work after so many years of public disparagement.

Thirty years ago I had the luck of initiating in Spanish-speaking America the objective study of the social phenomena produced here by coexistence with the races of Africa. Today, a generation later, it fills me with satisfaction to see how that work has been followed, amplified and improved by competent and

56“Os pido venia benevolente para unas consideraciones de carácter personal. No podría iniciar mi colaboración pública a esta Sociedad de Estudios Afro cubanos, cuyos miembros han tenido la generosidad de hacerme su primer presidente, sin deciros que hoy es para mí un día de emoción profunda, lleno de gratitud que, dicho sea con paradoja inevitable, es también un sentimiento de modesto orgullo.”
enthusiastic compatriots, those who still attend to unraveling [the topic] as much as possible, more than through singular effort but rather through collective coordination of the activities of everyone as a common project. For the one who speaks to you (again I ask for pardon for this intimate effusion of my soul) the constitution of this institute of Afro-Cuban studies is the coronation of a long undertaking, like the achievement of an honorary title after completion of one’s studies. (15)57

The critical turn in Ortiz’s reflections is his identification of “the constitution of this institute for Afro-Cuban studies” as “the coronation of a long undertaking.” His claim indicates once again that, by early 1937, the field of study he had imagined three decades before finally had earned its well-deserved “honorific title.” “Afro-Cuban studies” had materialized as a viable and recognized fact of life. But there is more to Ortiz’s language. The image of “the coronation” obviously links Ortiz’s personal history to the “old university ceremonies of investiture of rank” and, in turn, to Cuba’s transition to a new stage of culture. In this way, the various images that Ortiz superimposes upon each other do not add up to a master narrative of human development. The full story is less important than the critical points of transition: from “singular effort” to “common project”; from “adolescence” to civic-minded “man”; from “false categories of race” to liberating “science”; from “culture” to “Culture” . . . And what signals such transitions? With his images of “coronation” and “ceremonies of investiture,” Ortiz underscores the ceremonial component of the changes. Ortiz’s allegory is really about rites of passage.

57“Hace más de treinta años que tuve la suerte de iniciar en la América de habla hispana el estudio objetivo de los fenómenos sociales aquí producidos por la convivencia de las razas de Africa. Hoy, una generación después, me cabe la satisfacción de ver cómo aquella obra ha sido seguida, acrecida y mejorada por competentes y entusiastas compatriotas, los cuales aún se aprestan a desenvolverla hasta lo posible, más allá de los esfuerzos singulares, mediante de coordinación colectiva de las actividades de todos en una tarea común. Para quien os habla, (de nuevo pido perdone por esta efusión íntima de mi ánimo) la constitución de este instituto de estudios afrocubanos es la coronación de una larga tarea, como el logro de un título honorífico tras una carrera cursada.”
But in calling attention to ceremonies, Ortiz also points up another cultural tension he hopes to overcome. He wants to move beyond the merely ceremonial—that is, giving formal recognition to a situation already in effect—to recover the power of certain rites of passages, of particularly intense rituals, to induce social change. Benjamin’s characterization of Surrealism relates to Ortiz too: he emphasizes how some ceremonies produce “energies of intoxication” that could be pressed into the service of some kind of social “revolution.” Like the Surrealists, Ortiz hopes to initiate those kinds of socially transforming rituals in modern, secular contexts.

From that standpoint, his description of SEAC’s inaugural proceedings takes on larger import. By comparing the event to “one of the old university ceremonies of investiture” in which the boundaries of “faculty” (participants) and “audience” break down, Ortiz hopes to produce a similar effect. He wants to bring his own audience into the “new struggle, with greater capacity but with more responsibilities.” He seeks to enact a certain kind of magic through which desired outcomes materialize as social realities. His allegory functions as a spell in an unfolding magical rite in which his own “concurring public” plays an active role.

Hence, he highlights “the peculiar character of this ceremony today—realized by a concurrence as numerous as it is significant.” Ortiz follows up this description with another set of personal reflections that underscore the high stakes in the rite of passage he and his audience had instigated that January night. He represents his personal investment in SEAC as a matter of “destiny” and sets out to convince all present that their ultimate fate is also tied up in Afro-Cuban studies:

As an old man, it is a great honor to see how the thesis of the same project [I undertook decades ago] is taken up by the next generation; but these same
circumstances are a revitalizing tonic that reaffirms the youth of my spirit and puts me under even more pressure to dedicate my golden years to that same task that the vicissitudes of life and the intimate calling of vocation turned into my destiny: to work toward the unprejudiced study of a mistreated race and for the alleviation of its tremendous misfortune. (16)\textsuperscript{58}

This last of Ortiz’s personal reflections in the speech is typically revealing. “Unprejudiced study” of Afro-Cuban history and culture serve as the expressed purpose of the Society, yet Ortiz explicitly links his scholarly endeavors to a certain politics of culture. Knowledge-production, he reminds his audience, is part of the work of alleviating the “tremendous misfortune” of “a mistreated race.”

4.

In a 1932 essay entitled “El arte narrativo y la magia” [The Narrative Art and Magic], another prominent Latin American intellectual—the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges—points up the magic in any narrative. He underscores the unexpected associations and structures upon which stories depend and links these traits to James Frazer’s famous definition of magic:

That procedure or ambition of ancient men has been held together by Frazer in a convenient general law, that of sympathy, which stipulates an inevitable link between distant things, whether because their shape is similar—mimetic or homeopathic magic—or because of an anterior proximity—contagious magic. Kenelm Digby’s ointment was an illustration of the second, for it was applied not to the bandaged wound, but to the guilty steel that inflicted it—while the wound, without suffering the rigors of barbaric cures, healed. (Borges 1966: 88)

Borges calls attention to a similar reliance on “the convenient general law” of sympathy in narratives like the novel: “That dangerous harmony, that frenzied and precise causality, also

\textsuperscript{58}“Por ser viejo, me cabe hoy este honor de ver como la tesis de la faena propia es continuada por la generación sucesiva; pero esta misma circunstancia es tónico vital que reafirma la juventud de mi espíritu, y me impulsa con más apremio a consagrar mis años maduros a esa misma obra que los azares de la vida y el íntimo llamamiento de la vocación pusieron en mi destino, la de trabajar por el estudio imprejuzgado de una raza maltrada y por el alivio de su tremendo infortunio.”
rules the novel” (89). Narratives operate as “a precise game of observances, echoes, and affinities” (90).

Putting aside apparent historical correlations between “The Narrative Art and Magic” and the contemporary Cuban discourse of displacing magic, Borges’s analysis of the “laws” of stories illuminates the dynamics of Ortiz’s inaugural address to SEAC in January 1937. Borges’s argument that narratives mimic magic by playing “a precise game of observances, echoes, and affinities” frames the allegory of Ortiz’s speech as a magical act. As much as (if not more than) any other type of narrative, allegory operates magically according to Borges’s description. Allegory, by definition, functions mimetically. It is a dramatic device that seeks to establish “an inevitable link between distant things.” Following (Borges’s rendering of) Frazer’s law of sympathy, allegory works as a form of mimetic, or “homeopathic,” magic. It seeks specific material effects by creating a “dangerous harmony” and a “frenzied and precise causality” among the literal content of the narrative and some abstract principle or force.

The relation between Borges’s 1932 essay and the inauguration of SEAC in January 1937 is not entirely random. The juxtaposition of the two shows the extent to which Ortiz, with his allegory, consciously carried out the kind of mimetic magical tricks outlined by Borges. In the course of his discussion, Ortiz also cites Frazer’s characterization as well as various other theories of magic. Those citations signal the major correspondence at work in Ortiz’s talk: he attempts to enact a certain kind of magic by discussing magic. In that regard, his opening move—framing SEAC’s inauguration as a socially transforming ritual by setting up his talk as an allegory of rites of passage—establishes the tone for the rest of the night. He lays out a libratory “task” for the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies that was radically self-
conscious. And, with that reflexivity, the Society’s politics of culture—as figured by Ortiz—
diverges at an underlying level from many of the theories of Kultur ostensibly at work in and
on Cuban intellectual discourse. Both Frobenius and Spengler peg self-consciousness as
deadly to culture. In Frobenius’s doctrine of “reservoirs of culture,” “historical” cultures
spring organically and unconsciously from the underlying “original culture.” An historical
culture begins to wanes when it reflects upon and makes explicit claims about cultural
originality. For Frobenius, culture at its root sprang from instinct, not reflexivity.

Spengler offers a similar idea. As outlined in The Decline of the West, the “cultured”
man lives immersed in his culture and acts spontaneously, as if his actions are a matter of
destiny. In contrast, the “civilized” man critically reflects on his culture and, in doing so, sets
off its decline. As in Frobenius’s system, the self-conscious “civilized” man cuts himself off
from his vital instincts in trying to analyze them. For Frobenius and Spengler, truly
“cultured” people just live life; they do not think about life without actually experiencing it.
Of course, Frobenius and Spengler offered these “post-Romantic” visions of instinct in
opposition to Hegelian Idealism in which the culmination of history and of humanity arrived
with humans’ complete self-consciousness. In that tradition, the “civilized” individual took
precedence over the “cultured” man as the full awareness of self instead of instinct brought
the reflexive person to life. As in the wider intellectual discourse of which Ortiz’s speech was
part, the tension between these different perspectives played out forcefully in the inaugural
address. Ortiz spoke the post-Romantic language of Spengler, invoking “destiny” and
“epochs” of culture.

5.
Having outlined the urgent and universal import of Afro-Cuban studies, Ortiz insists that it is time to take up the labor of “unprejudiced study of a mistreated race”: “Now we will move to the dissertation that has been put at our charge, and its theme is *religion in poesía mulata*” (16; italics in original). Ortiz signals with that transition his intention to pursue the magic of talking about magic, as circumscribed by his introductory allegory. The topic of “*religion in poesía mulata*” leads him directly into a theory of religion and, in turn, of magic too.

Ortiz first offers an overview of his topic, including a telling disclaimer. “Th[is] writing is not ready to be read,” he admits.

*It will be only a selection of some completed concepts drawn from a study still in the forge that treats the beautiful flowering of Cuban genius that is called *black or mulatto poetry* and the demopsychological elements that one discovers in it, so as to be able to interpret better, with documentary objectivity and serene analysis, the contribution of the races to the soul of Cuba.* (16; italics in original)

This apologetic summary carries clear traces of *Kultur* philosophy. Most immediately, Ortiz describes his subject—“*black or mulatto poetry*”—as a “beautiful flowering of Cuban genius” that reflects “the soul of Cuba” (*el alma de Cuba*). Ortiz’s invocations of Cuban “genius” and of the population’s “soul” especially echo key Romantic terms that had worked their way into influential contemporary social scientific discourse, such as the ethnology of Franz Boas. (Shortly thereafter, Ortiz offers the first of his direct citations of Boas on “genius” and collective “soul.”)

Ortiz’s characterization of his talk as incomplete, as part of a work-in-progress (a typical move for him), functions as more than a means of covering his discourse’s

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59“No está hecho el escrito para ser leído. Será sólo una selección de conceptos comprendidos en un estudio que tenemos en la fragua acerca de esta hermosa floración del genio cubano, que se llama la poesía negra o mulata, y de los elementos demopsicológicos que en ella se descubren, para poder interpretar mayor, con objetividad documental y sereno análisis, el aporte de las razas al alma de Cuba.”
shortcomings in advance. The notion of incompleteness also reflects a critical, post-Kantian component of his argument. Ortiz’s disclaimer implies that his project, like all cultural expression, is necessarily inchoate. In its unfinished state, his “study still in the forge” gestures toward transcendental “Culture” and reminds his audience of that elusive—if not impossible—goal. This point—how a feeling of incompleteness creates a fundamental human drive toward cultural completion—soon emerges as central to his argument. Once again, Ortiz is already establishing associations between his “long undertaking,” the speech, and its subject. Just as he means to cast SEAC’s inauguration as socially transforming ritual by introducing allegorical rites of passages, Ortiz once again lets on that his speech mimics its topic. He hints that his talk, as part of a rite of passage marking (or inducing) Cuba’s transition to cultural maturity, is also a cultural expression. It is a “beautiful flowering of Cuban genius” that, in its incompleteness, strives for a final, liberating sense of completion.

But how does Ortiz arrive at those ends? How does he mark off the drive for cultural realization as a basic human impulse and establish direct correspondences between his expressed theme, “religion in poesía mulata,” and his discourse on that topic? Again, his hook is a universalist characterization of religion, and he gets there by considering poesía mulata as cultural expression. Ortiz expands the summary of his discussion by explaining that his broader “study, which still does not have a title,” takes up as one of its principal themes how poesía mulata reflects the unhappy position of a race and its consequent social resentment. Next we try, in successive chapters, to comprehend the reactions that the condition of suffering has produced in that race and how they reverberate through contemporary poetry, in its lyrics, in its elegies, in its hymns, in its satires, in its songs. (16-17)60

60“En nuestro estudio, que aún no tiene título, se trata como uno de los temas principales el de cómo se reflejan en la poesía mulata la posición infeliz de una raza y su consiguiente resentimiento social. Después tratamos, en sucesivos capítulos, de comprender las reacciones que en esa raza ha producido su condición
According to Ortiz, “one of the chapters [of the larger work] is dedicated to religion, and from that section we select these paragraphs that, as first fruit, we submit to your benevolent judgment” (17).

6.

Ortiz’s characterization of his chapter on religion and its relation to poesía mulata as “first fruit” once again resonates with theories of Kultur. As Francisco Vela had noted in his 1924 review, Frobenius posits “an ‘original culture’ that sometimes germinates and bears fruit in the form of temporal ‘historical’ cultures.” In his description, Ortiz figures religion—an element “in” poesía mulata—as well as his commentary about those religious components—the “first fruit” of scholarship—as corresponding expressions, or ‘germinations,’ of Cuban cultural “genius.” In the course of his talk, he inverts the relation, locating the origins of the poetry and of culture more generally in religion.

More immediately, he sets out to explain the “principal theme” of “how poesía mulata reflects the unhappy position of a race and its consequent social resentment.” He begins his examination with a question he locates at the heart of the issue: “Has religion been able to give to the Afro-American black an antidote to alleviate the poison produced in his spirit by the witches’ brew of social mistreatment?” (17). Ortiz quickly settles the issue. In an apparent summary of his argument, he answers his own question affirmatively, underscoring the therapeutic effects of religion among African-Americans. Religion has

sufrida y cómo ellas son reverberadas por la poesía contemporánea, en su lírica, en sus elegías, en sus himnos, en sus sátiras, en sus canciones.”

61“Uno de esos capítulos es el dedicado a la religión y de él seleccionamos estos párrafos que, como primicia, confiamos a vuestro juicio benevolente.”

62“¿La religión ha podido darle al negro afroamericano un antídoto para aliviar el envenenamiento producido en su ánimo por la ponzoña del maltrato social?”

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provided the sphere in which the socially oppressed could release “the poison” of their unjust experiences. “The black,” Ortiz insists, “has sought and continues to seek in his religious rites of intense collective emotivity a complement to his present, a catharsis of his boxed-up impulses, a satisfaction of his calabiotic desire, such as all other people of analogous culture have done” (17).63

As already noted, Ortiz refers directly to Frobenius and to Franz Boas in the course of his argument, but those influences surface in this summary statement early in the lecture. Ortiz’s remarks rest on the assumption that cultural types—akin to Frobenius’s “original culture”—play out in particular ways depending on socio-historical circumstances. Thus, Ortiz figures “the black” as a singular entity that correlates to “other people of analogous culture,” and his question is how “black” cultural impulses manifest themselves in certain contexts. As he proceeds, Ortiz shows that socio-historical factors determine forms of “black” expression but that the underlying structure follows a particular transhistorical pattern. “The black,” he implies, acts essentially the same under distinct forms of “social mistreatment”: by turning to “his religious rites” for a physiological, or “calabiotic,” emotional release of “boxed-up emotions,” a literal “catharsis” that brings a measure of “satisfaction” necessary to endure “his present” by temporarily creating a “complement” or alternative reality.

The majority of Ortiz’s speech unfolds accordingly: as a comparison of “black” cultural expressions in North America and in Cuba. He delineates how the common “intense collective emotivity” of an African ‘original culture’ plays out in radically different

63“El negro ha buscado y busca en sus ritos religiosos, de intensa emotividad colectiva, un complemento de su presente, una catarsis de sus impulsiones comprimidas, una satisfacción de su anhelo calabiótico, tal como han hecho los demás hombres de análoga cultura.”
“religious rites” within each region’s distinct ‘historical cultures.’ Ortiz offers poetry as a point of entry into the study but emphasizes that this approach makes comparison especially tricky. He notes that, first of all, very few black poets in either region seem to touch on religious themes. In fact, “if we must judge merely by its literary expressions, it appears that religious aura rises few times to the mind of the Afro-American poet; not the Christian aura that came to it through the faith of whites, nor that of its nearby and antecedent paganism” (17).64 “The Afro-American poet,” Ortiz implies, is a predominantly secular creature. The difficulty of approaching “black” religion through poetry is exacerbated in the Cuban case because, in contrast to North America, religion seems to crop up nowhere in Afro-Cuban cultural expression. “Observe most of all how Afro-Cuban poetry has not had the exuberance of Christian themes that make themselves known in Afro-Anglo literature,” he notes (17).65

A major portion of Ortiz’s discussion fleshes out this contrast and its roots in each region’s unique colonial history. He highlights the differences that stem from the predominance of the Protestantism derived in North America via northern Europeans versus the institutional presence in Cuba of the Spanish Catholic Church. Protestants in North America actively—and, by the mid-eighteenth century, successfully—tried to Christianize blacks. Colonial powers in Cuba took a much different approach and generally kept Catholicism away from blacks, either because of their own disinterest or because they feared the consequences of slaves’ discovery that within the Church all members were in theory spiritual equals. These denominational factors created drastically different developments

64“Si hemos de juzgar meramente por sus expresiones literarias, tal parece que a la mente del poeta afroamericano sube escasas veces al aura religiosa; ni la cristiana que le llegó por la fe de los blancos, ni la de su próxima y antecedente paganía.”

65“Obsérvese ante todo que la poesía afrocubana no ha tenido la exhuberancia de temas cristianos que se advierten en la literature anglonegra.”
among blacks in each region. And, according to Ortiz, the regional contrasts surface clearly in other forms of cultural expression even if they do not played out in Afro-American poetry.

To prove his point with regard to the North American situation, Ortiz offers multiple extended citations from Newbell Niles Puckett’s influential 1926 study, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. In the first case, he quotes Puckett’s observation that “it is an evident fact that among the religious songs of the blacks of North America, those that have earned the admiration of the world, one finds little or no music of special valor with profane character.’ In contrast,” Ortiz continues,

in the mulatto lyric of Hispanoamerica there are no sacred songs, in the traditionally liturgical and standardized sense of those distinct from the profane and ‘made-up.’ One could say that all are made in sin. In a reversal of that which happens in the United States, the songs of blacks in Cuba are not predominantly religious. Why? The causes are many (17).

Ortiz goes on to delineate various reasons already mentioned, but he singles out one particular point: the Christianization of North American blacks succeeded because Protestant denominations offered collective emotional release energized by the promise of a better future. Religious music not only reflects that hope-driven catharsis but also catalyzes it. “In that way, the *spirituals* sprout in the slave through an ideological evasion of his economic unhappiness,” Ortiz asserts. But

 aside from the social content that the religious hymns of Protestant blacks customarily had, more powerful still was the cathartic effect of the rhythm, of the music, of the song, of the *swing* or sway almost like a dance, and of the *shout* or ambulatory rhythm. All of this gave to the black mass an emotional collective expansion that for the duration of its life was its only liberty, its main diversion, an alleviating effect, as much as through the reality of the relaxation

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66 “En cambio, en la lírica mulata de Hispanoamérica no hay cantos sagrados, tradicionalmente litúrgicos y fijos, distintos de los profanos, “pecaminosos,” y “compuestos.” Pudiera decirse que todos son hechos en pecado. Al revés de lo que ocurre en los Estados Unidos, los cantos de los negros de Cuba no son predominantemente religiosos. Por que? Son varias las causas.”
of its nervous tension than through the imaginary of its mystic hopes for fulfillment. (18; italics in original)\(^{67}\)

This passage is pivotal in Ortiz’s discussion because it establishes the critical junction—the point of contact and divergence—between “Afro-Anglo” and “Afro-Cuban” cultures. Ortiz marks that cultural intersection by shifting the ground of religion away from content and into human physiology. The “ideological” framework of Protestantism—namely, “the imaginary of its mystic hopes for fulfillment”—matters much less in Ortiz’s view than the “cathartic effect” of the rituals themselves. Ortiz suggests that Christian theology, with its promises of physical and material redemption, really only matter to the extent that those images inspire blacks to engage in much more prosaic activities that generated “emotional collective expansion.” What counts most for Ortiz are sounds and movements that, regardless of the ideas expressed, work on the participants’ emotions and, most importantly, on their nervous systems. For Ortiz, the power of religion comes down to its ability to induce “the relaxation of nervous tension” among a group of individuals so that they can continue life’s struggle. The “collective” experience of that emotional and physical catharsis is vital and revitalizing. It strengthens the social bonds that the participants need in order first to survive and then to thrive.\(^{68}\)

\(^{67}\)“Así, los spirituals brotan en el esclavo por una evasión ideológica de su infelicidad económica.[…] Aparte de este contenido social que solían tener los himnos religiosos de los negros protestantes, era mas poderoso aún el efecto catártico del ritmo, de la música, del canto, del swing o balanceo casi danzario, y del shout o rito ambulatorio. Todo esto daba a la grey negra una expansion emocional colectiva que para su dura vida era su única libertad, su mayor diversion, un efectivo alivio, así por lo real descanso de su tensión nerviosa, como por lo imaginario de sus místicas esperanzas de satisfacción.”

\(^{68}\)With Ortiz’s emphasis on the importance of collective emotion, his silence about and lack of citation of Durkheim’s work is both curious and significant. I have yet to find a reference to Durkheim in any of Ortiz’s writings although I find it impossible to believe that he did not read anything by the pioneer of French sociology. Of course, Ortiz’s work reveals the traces of Durkheimian thought through its proliferation in Ortiz’s discourse network. In future research I hope to look further into this notable absence of Durkheim name in Ortiz’s oeuvre.
To this point in his discussion, Ortiz already hints that socially transforming cathartic experiences most commonly arise in religious contexts. After all, Christian theology got the ball rolling in the case under Ortiz’s immediate consideration. The insistence on the slave’s ultimate liberation moves them to song and dance in the first place. And, as Ortiz underscores in subsequent passages, the literal places of religion are also essential. The atmosphere of religious spaces, marked off as sites where divine energy irrupts and filled with elements to stimulate the senses, help create optimal conditions for “emotional collective expansion.” Thus, Ortiz repeatedly calls attention to the activities of “the temples.” For instance, he describes “the decisive cause” for the successful Christianization of North American blacks and the failure of that process in Cuba:

The black African, upon being catechized by the Protestant clergy of America, was taught to sing in the temples. It is not that the pastors to the black flock used music on purpose for their catechism. The common Protestant liturgies are very much based, particularly in the sects most separated from Catholicism, in the collective song of believers gathered together in the church. (19)

As he focuses on religious spaces that enable and optimize “collective song,” the terms “sacred” and “profane” emerge as increasingly important in Ortiz’s discussion. His frequent references to activities of “the temples” make it clear that he uses the words in their literal senses: “profane” endeavors occur ‘pro fanum,’ literally ‘outside the temple’; “sacred” affairs are defined similarly by their location in the temple, near the sacro (‘seat’ or ‘altar’).

With his literalist usage of “sacred” and “profane,” Ortiz raises the possibility that ostensibly “sacred” activities—such as North American blacks’ liberating religious rites—might occur not only in the “temples” but also in literally “profane,” non-religious spaces. Ortiz already

69“La causa decisiva fué que el negro africano al ser catequizado por los clérigos protestantes de América, fue enseñado a cantar en los templos. No es que los pastores de la grey negra usaran adrede de la música para su catequismo. Las comunnes liturgias protestantes se basan mucho, particularmente en las sectas más apartadas de la católica, en el canto colectivo de los fieles reunidos en la iglesia.”
has hinted at that idea by noting how “in the mulatto lyric of Hispanoamerica there are no sacred songs, in the traditionally liturgical and standardized sense of those distinct from the profane and ‘made-up.’” At the end of his discussion, Ortiz describes the liberating possibilities of a politics based precisely on that kind of move of enthusiastic collective liturgies from “sacred” to “profane” places. But more immediately, his description of the nature of Afro-Anglo Protestantism begins to displace religion on at least two levels: from content to catharsis and from “the temples” to the profanum.

7.

In considering the Cuban context, Ortiz builds on the implications in his discussion of Afro-Anglo Protestantism that religion is grounded in places other than those commonly expected. He goes on to explain how Cuban blacks, exposed to standardized Catholic liturgy instead of more spontaneous Protestant forms, had a much more distant relation to Christianity than their counterparts in North America. Nevertheless, Afro-Cubans still found viable religious outlets for their social oppression. Without Christianity, Cuban blacks also managed “emotional collective expansion” that provided a measure of “liberty,” “diversion,” and “an alleviating effect.” Since they were excluded from Catholic institutions explicitly, missionized half-heartedly, or exposed to formalized rituals that gave them little solace, slaves in Cuba recreated ancestral “cultuses” [cultos] in the Caribbean context.70 These “Afro-Cuban” religious institutions developed with relative independence from Christianity and operated away from the view of social, economic, political, and religious authorities.

70Ortiz and his colleagues frequently use “culto.” Throughout my discussion, I translate this term as “cultus” instead of as “cult” in order to retain the technical meaning of culto as any system of ritual practice. In this regard, culto carries no pejorative implications.
“Through all of these circumstances,” Ortiz summarizes, “Afro-Cubans conserve still their beautiful religious songs with far less contamination, with their verses, their music, their instruments and their mimetic dances, in secret or separate liturgical ceremonies, closer to their African roots. And outside of their temples one does not hear the sacred canticles” (21-2). 71

This characterization of religious developments among blacks in Cuba enables Ortiz to reinforce his earlier implications about the unexpected grounds of religion. As in describing the structure of Afro-Anglo Christianity, Ortiz points to “cathartic effects”—simultaneously emotional and physiological—as more important in Afro-Cuban cultuses than theological content. He also sets up the possibility that the catharsis set off by “sacred canticles” might be reproduced in “profane” contexts by drawing the powerful songs out of “their temples.” However, the second implication—with its latent politics—depends upon the first inference about the underlying workings of religion in and on the human nervous system. It is to that task—the articulation of a coherent theory of religion—that Ortiz dedicates the core of his talk.

The mutual presence among blacks in North America and in Cuba of “sacred songs” arising in transformative collective expressions from different kinds of sanctuaries—Anglo Negro Protestant churches in the first case; Afro-Cuban “temples” in the second—brings Ortiz back to the issue that he initially identifies as the focus of his talk: the apparent lack of religious themes in “black or mulatto poetry.” Ortiz marks this ostensible absence of religion in the poems as potentially contradictory—or counterintuitive at the very least—since he has

71“Por todas estas circunstancias, los afrocubanos conservan todavía sus bellos cantos religiosos con mayor incontaminación, con sus versos, sus músicas, sus instrumentos y sus danzas miméticas, en secretas o apartadas solemnidades litúrgicas, más próximos a sus veneros africanos. Y fuera de sus templos no se oyen los cánticos sagrados.”
just argued, in answer to another of his opening questions, that religion has been able “to give to the Afro-American black an antidote to alleviate the poison produced in his spirit by the witches’ brew of social mistreatment.” Why then did it “appear that religious aura rise few times to the mind of the Afro-American poet”? How could religion—a fundamental aspect of the “Afro-American” cultures of North America and Cuba—not work its way into those cultures’ poetic expressions? But, then again, Ortiz’s professed “dissertation” implies that there in fact is “religion in poesía mulata.” How does he account for this disjunction between poesía mulata’s appearances and its realities?

Ortiz works to resolve the tension by exposing it as a result of familiar conceptions of “religion.” The problem does not arise from gaps in his argument or from contradictions in “black” American cultures themselves. In the opening sections of his talk, he implies that the roots of religion lie elsewhere than commonly perceived. The middle portion of his discourse explicates his intention to displace limited notions with another broader, more accurate theory of religion that he has already implicitly introduced. He underscores the misconceptions about religion that many people project onto Afro-Cuban culture: “The typical black in Cuba is accustomed to being so removed from Catholic practices that some of us are surprised that poesía mulata could reveal religious themes” (22). However, that surprise is unwarranted because, in fact, Afro-Cuban culture is drenched in religion. Despite Afro-Cubans’ distance from Catholicism, the religious parameters of poesía mulata “should not surprise anybody. On the contrary, it is logical and inevitable that this should be the case.

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72 “Tan apartado suele estar el actual negro cubano de las prácticas católicas, que alguien sorprendiéndose de que en la poesía mulata pudiera darse el tema religioso.”
Is not the Afro-Cuban, with what he has of the black African and of the white Spaniard, saturated with religiosidad? Is not all of religion poetry?\footnote{“Sin embargo, no hay que asombrarse de ello, antes, al contrario, es lógico e inevitable que así suceda. ¿No está el afrocubano, por lo que tiene de negro africano y de blanco español, saturado de religiosidad? ¿No es la religión toda ella poesía?”}

Ortiz poses those last points as questions only for rhetorical purposes. In fact, his inquiries are critical declarations. With them, he identifies the character of poesía mulata and how the common inability to recognize the poetry’s nature urgently demands radical reconceptualization of religion. His last question gestures toward an expansive understanding: religion does not simply arise in poesía mulata; rather, that genre exemplifies religion, which is poetic by nature.

But Ortiz’s questions also play on two related but distinct critical terms: “religiosidad” and “religion.” As he proceeds, he outlines the connection between the two. “Religiosidad” is an essential element of the human constitution. A “biotic desire for overcoming is the definite essence of all religiosidad,” he asserts later. As such, as a component embedded in the nervous system, “religiosidad” gives rise to “religion” as a singular transcultural phenomenon as well as to multiple, culturally situated “religions.” This relation between “religiosidad,” “religion,” and “religions” relates to and parallels conceptions (such as in Frobenius’s system) of historical “cultures” as ‘flowerings’ springing from underlying reservoirs of ‘original culture’ embedded in some way in an individual’s make-up. “Religion,” it seems, is part of that ingrained “culture.”

However, Ortiz’s terms go and invert the dynamic. In his system, religion has deeper roots than culture, which largely remains for Ortiz the material by-product of ideas and actions. So from where does human thought and motivation spring? With the notion of

\footnote{“Sin embargo, no hay que asombrarse de ello, antes, al contrario, es lógico e inevitable que así suceda. ¿No está el afrocubano, por lo que tiene de negro africano y de blanco español, saturado de religiosidad? ¿No es la religión toda ella poesía?”}
“religiosity,” Ortiz circumscribes the seeds of human life in a particular “biotic desire for overcoming.” This places “culture” within “religious” parameters. Those common social structures, “culture” and “religion,” as well as their historical manifestations as distinct “cultures” and “religions,” all originate in Ortiz’s perspective from a universal drive for fulfillment, from “religiosity” itself.

From this perspective, a more accurate description of Ortiz’s topic would be “religiosity in poesía mulata” since he sets out to expose how the Afro-Cuban is “saturated with religiosity,” even when no “religion” is apparent. Also, we recognize in retrospect that Ortiz has been talking about “religiosity” all along in identifying the common ground among “Afro-Anglos” and “Afro-Cubans.” The drive in both cultures toward “liberty,” “diversion,” and “alleviating effects” is not only “the antidote” to “the witches’ brew of social mistreatment.” “Religiosity” remains latent in all people and among all social groups. The task toward which Ortiz already gestures is the channeling of the powerful “biotic desire to overcome” in productive, socially revitalizing directions.

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In the early sections of his talk, Ortiz implies that religiosity, while universal, still surfaces more directly and more forcefully in certain situations and among particular groups. He makes this idea clear with one of his rhetorical questions by suggesting that the Afro-Cuban was “saturated with religiosity” because of “what he has of the black African and of the white Spaniard.” Therefore, in order to illuminate the nature of Afro-Cuban culture as well as to carry out his critical reconfiguration of religion, Ortiz delineates the essence of religiosity as revealed through “the white Spaniard” and, especially, “the black African.” This move casts his argument as undeniably primitivist. He figures the Spaniard and the
African as primitive and archaic in the sense that they move observers closer to the *arche*—the ‘opening’ or origin—from which human culture springs.

Much of Ortiz’s primitivism derives from his use of influential contemporary European and North American anthropological scholarship. He eventually makes his typical move to unsettle ethnocentric implications of this scholarship, but in the immediate term he draws on his well-known European and North American peers. In an important paragraph, foundational to his argument and peppered with references to Lucien Levy-Bruhl, Raoul Allier, Franz Boas, and Bronislaw Malinowski, Ortiz lays out the archaic “black African” religiosity that profoundly shapes Afro-Cuban culture:

The black of Africa lives submerged in religion and magic. His intense religion is concomitant with that paralogical mentality that does not analyze the causes of phenomena because, still ignoring them, he understands them by common sense. Religion kills his intellectual curiosity with the consciousness that he has to know the magical and suprahuman cause of everything, particularly those that are unusual and surprising. Religion makes perennial his sociable and tranquil feeling, makes him hypersensitive to all novelty but an enemy of any radical innovation. Religion makes him live fearful at all times of the mysterious danger of spells or of supernatural caprice, and he submits and resign himself to it, without the broad perspectives of time or space. And all of his society is sustained by religion. ‘Among primitives, religion is the cement of the social fabric.’ (22) 74

In its reliance on contemporary ethnography, Ortiz’s characterization sounds notably pejorative. The passage, in building first on Levy-Bruhl’s work, demarcates "the primitive mind" that follows “that paralogical mentality that does not analyze the causes of phenomena.” According to Ortiz, this lack of self-consciousness make the black African

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74 “El negro de Africa vive sumergido en la religión y la magia. Su intensa religión es concomitante de esa mentalidad paralógica que no analiza las causas de los fenómenos, porque aún ignorando las, las tiene por bien sabidas. La religión mata su curiosidad intelectual por la conciencia que tiene de conocer la causación mágica y sobrehumana de todo, particularmente de lo insólito y sorprendente. La religión hace perenne su sentido gregario y quietista, hipersensitivo a toda novelería, pero enemigo de toda innovación. La religión lo hace vivir temiendo en todo instante el peligro misterioso del maelficio o del capricho sobrenatural, y lo somete y resigna, sin extensas perspectivas de tiempo ni espacio. Y toda su sociedad está sometida por la religión. ‘Entre los primitivos, la religión es el cemento de la fábrica social.’”
passive, scared, and weak: he “lives submerged in religion and magic”; he “does not analyze the causes of phenomena”; “religion kills his intellectual curiosity” and “makes him fearful at all times of the mysterious danger of spells or supernatural caprice,” to which “he submits and resigns himself.”

Nevertheless, the last sentence—a citation lifted directly from Malinowski’s *Magic, Science, and Religion*—underscores the positive aspects of the “black African” mindset. Despite his refusal to think about “the causes of phenomenon,” “the black of Africa”—according to Ortiz’s description—still maintains vital societies. With religion as “‘the cement of the social fabric,’” African societies thrive. They warrant admiration. Ortiz develops the point by continuing along the same lines. Citing other texts by Malinowski, Ortiz identifies how religious expressions like myths, an “incredibly important cultural force,” “shaped [Africans’] most profound religious, ethical and social judgments and their pragmatic rules of everyday life. Their religion, like their economy is collective, socialized,” Ortiz concludes (22). In his view, those traits are admirable. Already, he is anticipating the final portion of his talk, when he presents a specific way to channel Africans’ “collective, socialized” economic and ethical sensibilities, born of the cement of “religion,” into self-conscious, modern forms that would create similarly strong social bonds without falling prey to the dangerous passivity of “that paralogical mentality.” In circling around archaic religiosity, Ortiz is closing in on profane forms of ritualistic, collective release of the “biotic desire for overcoming.”
In trying to isolate “religiosity” as a fundamental component of human nature, Ortiz works in the next section of his discussion to show that what the Afro-Cuban “has from the white Spaniard” is, in fact, a similar lack of Christianization:

This absence of catechism for the black has reflected a similar situation for the white. Already by the nineteenth century, when the black population reached its apogee, travelers used to point to the lack of religiosity in Cuba as a characteristic of the population. (27)75

The nineteenth-century travelers’ comments about Cubans’ “lack of religiosity”—“la irreligiosidad”—brings Ortiz back to his key point about long-running misperceptions about religion. The “absence of catechism”—that is, the weak presence of the Catholic religion—does not amount to “lack of religiosity.” After all, “the white Spaniard” has contributed to exactly the opposite effect: the saturation of the Afro-Cuban with “religiosity.” Ortiz corroborates the opinion of the historian Antonio Las Barras y Prado that Cubans are “better called scarcely devout [poco beato]” than “scarcely religious [poco religioso].” For centuries, they have exhibited little interest in—and often outright hostility to—Catholic institutions, but that characteristic only amounts to “la irreligiosidad” if interpreted according to a limited conception of religion.

According to Ortiz, Cubans’ turn away from Catholicism in fact has a paradoxical but fundamentally "religious" quality. In their rejection of the colonizers' religious institutions, Cubans stumbled into their own worldview that parallels primitive paralogic in relying on impulse and tradition instead of critical analysis. At root, Cuban scorn for the Church is an *expression* of religiosity; it is driven by the “biotic desire to overcome.” However, this religious impulse also produces a general state of alienation and unhappiness among Cubans.

75“Esta ausencia de catequismo para el negro ha reflejado una parecida situación para el blanco. Ya desde el siglo XIX, cuando el apogeo de la población negra, los viajeros advertían en Cuba la irreligiosidad como un carácter de su población.”

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To make the point, Ortiz quotes himself from his 1913 "Open Letter" to Miguel de Unamuno:

We do not have religion. We are non-believers. Our ideas about the life beyond do not cease being coarse and badly sketched superstitions. Neither are we fervent for any cultus, nor partisans of free thought. What for? Our lazy mentality is left lulled to sleep by rites in which we hear with nostalgic pleasure, when we are old, the advice of our nursemaids, and we would lament to lose that poetry. And we do not go beyond [the choice of] practicing a religion or being atheist; thinking about the great dilemmas [...] is considered silly. (28)

With this self-citation on Cuban indolence and passivity, Ortiz once again gestures toward self-conscious collectivism. Cubans need to “think about the great dilemmas” in order to break out of a “cultus of disbelief.” They have to consider together life’s great mysteries. This collective reflection would unite them in a commitment to the common good.

But, according to Ortiz, if Cubans’ rejection of Catholicism reflects a lack of self-consciousness, the religiosity from which the dismissal stems also provides an opening. The Cuban people "are religious, at times deeply so.” This tendency indicates that “they feel the emotion of the numinous, even if generally in the pretheological phase of religiosity. They are religious because they always hope for the prodigious from the mysterious.” Cubans’ sentiment corroborates the "ancient and oft-repeated saying that although the gods were born of fear, all religion, in its pristine essence, is hope more than terror” (33). In this way, Ortiz illuminates the ironic benefits of “pretheological religiosity.” Popular religion in Cuba is misguided, incapable of critical reflection, yet this limitation generates an uninhibited, hopeful outlook that ultimately drives the populace toward a collective ethic.

Ortiz gives further shape to what he sees as the obliquely admirable nature of popular religion. "These human masses [...] want first of all charity," he explains, and "charity, the most social of virtues, is a commerce of love between the gods and men.[...] Their religion
was an agreement with the supernatural mystery" (33-4). The agreement is "contractual." As "commerce," popular religion appears as a matter of understandable self-interest, but "it is not that [these people] are materialists in the set fashion of modern commercialism" (34). Religious transactions rest on the principle of personal gain, just like capitalism, but the religious economy recognizes the ultimate interdependency of individuals in the system, the recognition of which many participants in capitalist economies fall short. Ortiz sets up "religious" economies against the "materialism" of "modern commercialism" that dictates only selfish concern. These passages demonstrate how Ortiz’s entire discourse unfolds as a politics of culture directed toward the displacement of the magic of capitalism.

To that end, Ortiz quickly points up a key limitation of the commerce of popular religion. To some extent, the transactions in popular religion parallel capitalism. "The theoanthropic economy," he explains, "is not of long-term credits […] that one day, upon death, produces eternal returns; rather, this is religion of immediate consumption, rites of exchange without loans or accumulated interest" (34; emphasis in original). Similarly, capitalism and the theoanthropic economy both “confide much in that mana called ‘luck.’” Both systems hinge on the faith in powers that humans themselves have created and that "cloud the mind regarding the cause of things and of natural and social phenomena" (34). In this way, without referring to Marx directly, Ortiz links selfish capitalist materialism to the backward “paralogical mentality.” Both systems rely on magical conceptions of causality.

He returns shortly to magic not only to critique it but also to recover it. In order to do so, he has to circumscribe the key point of his lengthy reflections on the religiosity of the Cuban population. The "theoanthropic economy" carries the benefit of preserving "an
inextinguishable messianic hope,” Ortiz emphasizes (35). But this impulsive expectancy holds uncertain potential:

All of the outrageous arrogance of social resentment or the erotic impudence of manliness in the individual and directed toward physiological coupling becomes at times eunichism upon passing from familiar range to the sphere of the group, of the city, and of the nation in whose collective ambiance the courage, always necessary in order to transcend, requires other tensions, other forces, and other forms of discipline for social fecundity. (35)

In other words, the source of collective virility comes from religious impulses, grounded in overpowering hopes for better lives, but these hopes threaten to lead people off into an emasculating world of fantasy in which humans abdicate control over their lives.

“Eunichism”—the misdirection of religiosity’s vital drive for transcendence—can mislead people toward the idea that “‘one man’ could change the course of things, to faith in ‘the strong man’ [caudilla], and to the collective incapacitation of [the population’s] own intelligent, unified, and sustained power” (35).

This passage reveals the simultaneous repulsion and attraction of popular religion for Ortiz. He implies that religiosity, despite its common root, could lead in very different directions as it manifests itself in historical cultures.76 Certain trajectories are beneficial

76In underscoring potentially different manifestations of universal “religiosity,” Ortiz’s theory of religion correlates directly with another contemporary intellectual development: so-called ‘phenomenology of religion.’ In an earlier version of the present study, I focus on this connection. I argue that Ortiz’s text should be read as an example of phenomenology of religion (Shefferman 2000). The designation ‘phenomenology of religion’ should not be confused with Husserlian thought or other familiar uses of ‘phenomenology.’ Phenomenology of religion shares certain Kantian and pre-Kantian distinctions and presuppositions with other phenomenologies but developed as a separate field after the 1920s. Scholars have disputed the boundaries of phenomenology of religion from the start. Nevertheless, the term has been used mostly by philosophers of religion who locate their own work in a distinguishable ‘tradition’ that includes figures such as: W. Brede Kristensen (Norwegian; 1867-1953), Rudolf Otto (German; 1869-1937), Gerardus van der Leeuw (Dutch; 1890-1919), Joachim Wach (German; 1898-1955), Mircea Eliade (Romanian; 1907-1986), and Åke Hultkrantz (Swedish; 1920- ). The majority of these scholars trained with proponents of (or emerged directly from) nineteenth-century continental theology. The phenomenologists of religion also draw heavily on contemporary anthropologists, like Lévy-Bruhl (French; 1857-1939) and Frobenius (German; 1873-1938), and on historians of religion, such as Raffaele Pettazzoni (Italian; 1883-1959). As I have already highlighted, Ortiz cites many of those scholars in his January 1937 speech and elsewhere in his work. All of this intertextuality demonstrates clearly that ‘phenomenology of religions’ was clearly part of the wider discourse circuit in which contemporary
while others can be deadly. With the potential benefits and dangers of popular religion, what should be done? Standing at this crossroads, Ortiz's next move is decisive. He claims the coexistence of virility and danger as a fundamental characteristic of religion itself and seeks a way to channel along proper lines the potentially explosive impulse of religiosity. He once again points to reflexivity as the answer and proposes to “descend” into the territory of religiosity’s manifestations in order to get a better handle on the matter. It is a tricky endeavor, Ortiz suggests, but his speech’s introductory allegory reminds the audience that the future of humanity depends upon proper theoretical understanding of religiosity. Only with this accurate knowledge can Ortiz and his allies in Afro-Cuban studies act effectively.

9.

Ortiz’s turn to specific manifestations of religiosity force him to distinguished further the terms —“magic,” “religion,” and “science”—that he has been using all along. His central point is that poesía mulata, as a product of the diverse cultural streams that fed into Cuba over the course of its development, “refract” magic, religion and science (as he puts it later in his speech) as they play out in Cuba. According to Ortiz, magic, religion, and science represent three modes of religiosity distinguished according to perceptions of material causality. “Magic” hinges on the idea that practitioners can induce particular material effects by following prescribed actions, that they can manipulate causes.77 “Religion” involves

Cuban intellectual activity moved. For more on phenomenology of religion, see Allen 1987 and Sharpe 1986 (especially Chapter 10).

77From the start of his career, Ortiz identified “fetishism” as the most primitive form of magic, one that had passed to Cuba with African slaves. Following contemporary definitions of fetishism, Ortiz characterized it as a magical mode in which particular material objects assume divine power, such that the fetishist never even arrived at the idea of invisible and capricious “gods.” The fetishist was too much of a literalist to imagine the unseen. Ortiz opened the body of his first book, Los negros brujos [The Black Witch-Doctors] (1906), along those lines:
beliefs in animate higher beings that cause events in the world. For Ortiz, “myth” exemplifies this mode of thought by offering far-reaching, fantastic cosmological perspectives. In both magic and religion, causes are irregular, subject to the felicitous will of magicians and gods. In contrast, “science” assumes the ordered march of time governed by predictable ‘natural’ laws, including the Newtonian principle of action and reaction.

Ortiz goes on to place the three modes in a progressive framework of “evolution”: “magic” is the most “primitive,” governed by a misguided “paralogic” regarding the ability of individuals to cause specific external effects; “religion” situated causality in a broader field governed by powers beyond human control and thus represents a logical step forward toward “science,” in which “the broad perspectives of time and space” subsume religion’s “fear”-inducing notions of “supernatural caprice” (22). Despite the value judgments implicit in his reference to an upward “evolution” of logic, Ortiz does not hold the judgment as absolute. In other words, magic is not necessarily and implicit ‘bad’ nor science always and everywhere ‘good.’ As indicated at the beginning of his talk, “false categories of race”

If one bears in mind that the western regions of Africa, the regions from which almost all of the slaves brought to Cuba were snatched, are the bastions of fetishism; that this religious form constitutes a very simple cult, finding for itself in all places and within reach things to convert into fetishes; and that the religious ideas are those that take root most firmly and defend lives against the fiercest missionization, then one will comprehend without effort that in the psychological evolution of the black race in Cuba, superstition survived the shipwreck of almost all other African social factors. The Afro-Cuban, although he begins to call himself Catholic, continues being fetishistic.[…] African fetishism entered Cuba with the first black. But fetishism does not signify for African societies the expression of a pure religious ideal [idealidad]. Fetishism is the most primitive form of religion, the beginning of the social differentiation of the religious phenomenon; there is that which appears completely amalgamated with other social phenomena, especially with one of those, still latent, if one can put it that way; a phenomenon that should achieve a subsequent germination, a more elevated position in the scale of the gradation of social phenomena, which is the scientific. For the black fetishist his religion is the shield that blocks the unknown forces that scare him into endeavoring to convert them into favor. (Ortiz 1973: 23-4)

At a number of points in the January 1937 lecture (e.g. Ortiz 1937a: 34), he follows the same idea: that “fetishistic” perceptions of causality constitute “a very simple cultus” within the sphere of magic.

78I refer the reader back to Ortiz’s description about “the black of Africa,” who “lives submerged in religion and magic,” for clear evidence of how Ortiz distinguishes terms without explaining them directly.
circulate in the name of science, indicating that scientific claims also point to suspicious or illogical causes. Like the Cuban intellectual discourse that it simultaneously reflects and shapes, Ortiz’s endeavor rests on an unrelenting admiration for magic. Ortiz sees in the “paralogical mentality” of “the black of Africa” an essential social “cement” urgently needed in contemporary Cuba. But, more fundamentally, he considers magic gutsy. It embodies “the courage, always necessary in order to transcend” and to generate “social fecundity,” that Cuba—and, it seems, modern society as a whole—has lost through “collective incapacitation of its own intelligent, unified, and sustained power.” If nothing else, magic is bold and vital. Magic faces down the immediate shortcomings of life with a motivation, an assertion, to take action in the world, on the world, to change it by force of will. Ortiz’s move, archetypical of the Cuban discourse of displacing magic, is to try to bring science to the study of magic in order to push the best of both modes—science’s “broad perspectives of time and space” and magic’s “courage”—toward another modality that transcends both of them.

Ortiz drives toward that objective by urging his audience to take the plunge with him—through a pathway opened by poesía mulata—into a nebulous and threatening territory where magic, with its audacious attitudes toward the material world, resides:

To encounter the religious theme in Afro-Cuban lyrics at times one has to descend toward magic and, still more, has to understand magic and religiosity in that primary phase of its formation, in that ideological magma of the sacred […] where reverential terror and the propitiation of the mysterious that constitutes its nucleus has not yet arrived at the expression of the individuated concept of the numen. (35)

This transitional paragraph presents the key images in Ortiz’s theory of religion: “one has to descend toward magic” where it rests, with “religiosity,” in an “ideological magma of the sacred”; that most primitive, or “primary phase,” of the sacred “has not yet arrived at” religion, which entails “the individuated concept of the numen” as distinct deities; rather, at
that base level magic exposes the “nucleus” of “the sacred”—and the roots of “religiosity”—as a sense of undifferentiated “mysterious” power that inspires “reverential terror” and “propitiation.”

Building on contemporary scholarship, Ortiz figures the “nucleus” floating in the “ideological magma of the sacred” as “mana.” The term, he insists, captures a fundamental human instinct about greater powers at work in the world. In that regard, mana is the seed of religion, science, and philosophy, which all try to make sense of the world’s ambiguities. He offers some examples of “theoplasmic concepts” in Cuba that parallel mana. All of the terms are "vague and confusing like the [great] mystery itself”:

The words cocorícamo, merequetén, bilongo, timba, rabia, zumba, and other terms of Afro-Cuban folklore express 'the ineffable,' that 'I don't know what' that shuns all definition, that moves us for example in feminine beauty, in stirring music, in the deepest caverns, in heroic sacrifice, in human pain, in the unsolvable problem, in the sky… in life’s mystery…. (35-6; ellipses in original)

Ortiz’s examples of the indescribable lead to a point of emphasis about the tangible, or ‘material,’ parameters of religion. Citing Lévy-Bruhl, Ortiz explains, "More precisely mana for primitives is something vividly real; it is for them like the vital essence of all reality" (36). He offers supporting citations from prominent contemporary scholars, including Codrington, Pettazzoni, and Marett, but finally attempts to put the problem into his own words.

*Mana* is the nebulosity where the world of religion must take shape. A theoplasmic, pretheological concept. *Mana* tries to signify something like the sacred, but in a substantial sense that our Castilian language has not captured from the Latin word *sacer*, from which it comes. *Mana* could be translated, for example, as 'sacripotency' [*sacripotencia*] or 'sagrality' [*sagralidad*], if those neologisms would be permitted. Something like 'numinousness' [*numinosidad*], if that word did not already indicate a preconception of individuation. (37-8)
Ortiz immediately identifies the valuable and necessary aspect of this element of religion by clarifying the importance of *mana* for understanding contemporary Cuban society: "Without a doubt, all religious conceptions of the great popular mass, and not only of the Afro-Cuban but also of the Euro-Cuban, float on a sea of clouds where chaos, mystery, and sacripotency prevail; *mana*, hoping for the verb that gives a beginning to reality, which is nevertheless imagined" (39). The description lays bare Ortiz's persistent belief about reason’s mystifying power to reshape social realities. Having identified “theoplastic concepts” like *mana* and their relation to “religiosity” and “magic,” Ortiz can move—finally!—to a consideration of *poesía mulata* itself.

Throughout much of his discussion of *poesía mulata*, Ortiz exhibits a clear ambivalence. Although most of the poets he discusses were his friends and in the audience that night, Ortiz largely takes them to task for falling prey to the tendencies of Cuban popular religion. He re-emphasizes one of the speech’s opening points: that the poems—like their creators—are decidedly secular and appear to exhibit no religious sensibility. They often incorporate religious themes but, like so much Cuban culture, lack reflexivity. As Cubans who openly disregarded the Church, the *poetas mulatos* often show scorn for the religious elements that make their way into the poems. The *poetas mulatos* do not recognize the vital, potentially revolutionary religiosity that courses through their work. Ortiz bemoans the scornful tone of much *poesía mulata* as a form of self-hatred. The denial of African roots contributes to the fundamental alienation of Cubans from primordial drives. “Today, the
scarce inclination of poesía mulata toward preterit perspectives has impeded the entrance of African mythology, with its anecdotal richness, into the literary domain," he notes (42-3).

Ortiz singles out his friend Nicolás Guillén, who was present at the lecture as one of the new Society’s Vice Presidents. Guillén also had earned worldwide fame in recent years as the shining light of so-called “afrocubanismo” [Afro-Cubanism]. According to Ortiz, Guillén mimics “Afro-Cuban magic” for literary purposes only. “The magic rite of [Guillen’s famous poem] ‘Sensemaya,’” Ortiz notes, “is an individual conjuring of African witchcraft revived aesthetically” (41). The poem depicts a ritual of propitiation. The participants bring on the death of a serpent by chanting what they want to occur:

    Sensemayá, la culebra,
    Sensemayá […]
    La culebra muerta no puede comer […]
    Sensemayá, se murió!

    [Sensemayá, the snake,
     Sensemayá […]
     The dead snake cannot eat […]
     Sensemayá, it died!]

But, in Ortiz’s view, Guillén overlooks the most important aspects of African forms by incorporating only "mere descriptive narration." The poem verges on art-for-art’s-sake. Instead, "poesía mulata could, if it wanted, translate effusive mystic depths.[…] But the mulatto poets of the day no longer believe in the gods of their black grandparents. And [the poets] even mock contraptions of magic and witchcraft" (43). Ortiz points to Guillén’s own description of the poem as indicative of the problem. “Guillén himself says it is ‘a song to kill a serpent.’” By Ortiz’s estimation, what Guillén underplays is how the poem “is a magic rite” in a very literal, not merely aesthetic, sense. The poem “is a ‘song’ like songs were at their origin, a ‘chant,’ an ‘enchantment’ […] The trembling reptile succumbs to the conjuring
of the sacred words” (40). Ortiz’s implication is that Guillén’s poem does not simply represent an Afro-Cuban “magic rite”; the poem operates the same way as a “conjuring of sacred words” to enact a material effect.⁷⁹

Ortiz’s analysis of Guillén’s “Sensamaya” is crucial to the discourse of displacing magic. Guillén and Ortiz both employ notions of magic as a propitiatory act and apply that definition to the magic in the poem. However, Ortiz turns the idea back on Guillén, underscoring the magic of “Sensamayá.” Ortiz then pushes the issue further, imagining the libratory possibilities of that reclamation, that transposition of magic to intellectual production that so often talks about magic: “The day that [our] culture opens the doors of the black temples and a mulatto genius [un genio mulato] knows how to make use of their aesthetic treasures, humanity will receive the gift of a prodigious art that will give new value to the universal qualities of Cuba” (42). Ortiz’s statement is prophetic. Or, more to the point, it foreshadows a prophecy. His words set up the last portion of his talk, in which he unleashes a vision based on that very idea of “open[ing] the doors of the black temples” so that “mulatto genius” can “make use of their aesthetic treasures” for the sake of the nation and of humanity at-large.

In one of the last sections of his talk, Ortiz brings all of the threads of his discussion together around considerations of work by Regino Pedroso, a founding member of the

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⁷⁹In the next chapter, I pick up on Ortiz’s suggestion that Guillén’s poem is “a magic rite.”
Society for Afro-Cuban Studies and another of the popular “mulatto poets.” Ortiz argues that Pedroso’s work effectively embodies the spirit of poesía mulata by revealing religiosity in its “diverse colorations.” If Guillén’s “Sensemayá” essentially is a magical portrayal of Afro-Cuban magic, Pedroso’s work contains within itself the full evolutionary spectrum of religiosity. His poems include elements of magic, religion, and science.

But rather than focus on a comparison between Guillén and Pedroso to make this point, Ortiz juxtaposes the latter to ‘Cuba’s Great Mulatto Poet’ of the nineteenth century, Gabriél de la Concepción Valdés, popularly known as Plácido. By Ortiz’s description, Plácido’s verse is not properly “mulatto.” It does not represent Cuba, or even mulattos, because Plácido was too ‘whitened,’ which also meant being too Catholic. The true “mulatteness”—mulatez—of Pedroso’s poetry stands out in contrast, Ortiz argues. “With Plácido, mulatto lyric only enters into the church,” Ortiz explains. “The religious poetry of Plácido is in the category of those types of imitative, conventional, and baroque lyric very common in that epoch among poets of color of all American nations” (54). Ortiz pinpoints the source of the ‘problems’ of “imitative, conventional, and baroque lyric” that Cuba artists need to overcome: “One has to recognize that Plácido does not arrive at extremes in his submission precisely because his religion is white”; the ‘Great Mulatto Poet’ never “reflects

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80Pedroso (b. 1896) was a celebrated writer who hailed from the Matanzas region of Cuba. He began to earn recognition in the late 1920s as “Afro-Cubanism” gathered steam in Cuba and beyond. His poems appeared in the widely read literary supplement to Diario de la Marina. Throughout his life, Pedroso remained active within leftist intellectual circles. After the 1959 revolution he served as Cultural Minister in China and Mexico and traveled widely to advance literature and the arts as an integral revolutionary activity. His 1939 book, Más allá canta el mar [Farther Out the Sea Sings], won the Cuban National Prize for Poetry. For more on Pedroso, including primary and secondary bibliographies, see Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística 1984.

81Plácido—an educated, city-bred ‘light-skinned mulatto’—was a renowned literary figure in the 1830s and 1840s. He was the resident poet at one of Cuba’s daily newspapers, La Aurora de Matanzas, and a regular contributor to other publications. He was executed in 1844, at the height of his popularity, for his presumed leadership of the pro-independence and antislavery ‘Conspiracy of the Ladder.’ His execution became a worldwide cause célèbre, and he was glorified by many nationalists well into the twentieth century as one of Cuba’s great writers and as a national hero. For more on Plácido, see Stimson 1964.
in his verses’ religious transmutation from paganism to Christianity”; he “always dissipulates his own color—of pigmentation and of social position—and evades all incorporation of the survival carried through negro ancestry. All around Plácido is the religious silence of the mulatto muses” (54-5; emphases in original).

As usual, Ortiz attributes the loss of vitality reflected in Plácido’s verse and its derivativeness to Cuba’s unique colonial history. He reiterates a key point from an early portion of his talk: that colonialism in Cuba created two separate domains. “In religion, as in literature, the economy, commerce, law, the family, and all other social institutions, there were two levels in Cuba: the official and the contraband, the real and the fake, the dominant and the dominated, the white and the black…” (55; ellipses in original). Plácido spoke the language of the first, “official,” “dominant” but, in doing so, gestured silently toward the world of “the contraband” in which the silent “mulatto muses” wait for their chance to speak.

Ortiz’s images of Plácido galvanize his argument. Ortiz clearly sets up Plácido’s verse as a symbol of that which Cuba still struggles to overcome. To Ortiz, Plácido’s poetry reflects the weak sensibility of “the dominated.” It is derivative and “fake,” but Cubans are a “mulatto” people who are not like that. They need to celebrate and to continue to create culture that captures all parts—especially those “contraband” elements—of mulatto Cuban character. This idea frames Ortiz’s speech. His implication is that he too, in that very moment of speaking about Cuban culture, produces another form of cultural expression that stands in stark contrast to Plácido’s. Ortiz figures his own discourse on culture as a truly ‘mulatto’ inversion of ‘the Great Mulatto Poet’s’ phony cultural forms. In other words, Ortiz reinforces the nature of his talk as a cubanismo that upsets an imposed, “official” European culture for the sake of originality and authenticity of spirit.
Accordingly, Pedroso—a new ‘Great Mulatto Poet’—serves in Ortiz’s speech as the ‘true’ voice of all Cubans. Ortiz presents him in an open, ongoing confrontation with Cuba’s colonial history. In contrast to Plácido, who merely adopts the “white” ways of “the dominant,” Pedroso seeks to redeem the legacy of oppression. Thus, Ortiz assumes a new tone as his discussion shifts to Pedroso. “Redemption” and “liberation,” words that Ortiz had been using throughout his speech, suddenly take on new overtones. The words now signal future possibilities instead of simply describing the desires of Ortiz’s subjects of study. The turn to Pedroso makes the redemptive drive of Ortiz’s project more explicit. He does not hide his own desire to give larger meaning and purpose to suffering endured. Through Pedroso, Ortiz imagines the transformation of the injustices heaped on Cubans—and exemplified by the long-running social mistreatment of Afro-Cubans—into the very foundation of new and better social order.

It is logical that for Ortiz this turn hinges on magic. Most immediately, magic is part of the history of Cuban suffering and remains embedded in the island’s culture. It too has to be redeemed. But, in Ortiz’s allegorical reading of Pedroso, magic serves as the basis for the whole redemptive process. In the preceding section of the lecture, he presents magic as an impetuous manifestation of religiosity: magic requires “courage” to face down the world, to try to change it. Where else to root a redemptive politics of culture if not in the courageous magical impulses of religiosity?

Ortiz moves in that direction by insisting that, unlike Plácido, Pedroso never “evades all incorporation of the survival carried through negro ancestry.” Therefore, ‘religion’ plays out entirely differently in Pedroso’s work than in Plácido’s verse. “The emotion of religiosity
also transpires in Regino Pedroso; but it is already another religiosity.” It is “religion as present experience” and, as such, religiosity at its purest (57). Ortiz explains:

In the poems of Pedroso, there are various themes of religion. [...] At times Pedroso transmutes the elements of biblical myth into social parable. In his ‘Canción de Fragua’ [Song of the Forge] he utilizes the Christian tradition of the Messiah born in Bethlehem, of God made man and shown to the Three Wise Men in the Epiphany, to compose a song of social allegory, guided by the star that illuminates toward redemption. (57-8)

That “transmutation” of “biblical myth into social parable” reveals the similarities between the two genres and exposes a common “religious” impulse: the desire for “redemption.” Pedroso draws from all of the different religious forms that exist in Cuba, Ortiz remarks, and plays them off of each other in a search for final justice.

In all of his religious poems, Pedroso philosophizes the contrast between the anguish of human suffering and the bliss that does not arrive. [...] It is the New Testament of the whites glossed in black, [...] with the light of contemporary reason, without bent devotion, with erect piety. Perhaps in Hispanic poetry there is not anyone who has felt more honestly than Regino Pedroso that ideological conflict between the promised myth of redemption and the deception of unredeemed humanity. [...] Plácido asked for solace, Pedroso asks for explanations. (58)

In demanding “solace” and “explanations,” Pedroso is "a prophet” (“and every prophet is a poet,” Ortiz adds) much like the fiery figures of the Bible who question God in their search for final justice (59). Still, “the attitude of Pedroso is not necessarily impious. [...] In a panicked lyric and in a divinely inverted epic, projected not toward the past but at that which is coming. Like every poet who feels life in tragedy, in a thirst for justice, such is Pedroso: he has a frenzy of premonition, ecstasy of revelation.” Whereas “Plácido arrives at the temple, kneels and prays, Pedroso enters, philosophizes proudly, and leaves” (59).

Ortiz begins his lecture with a call for “documentary objectivity and serene analysis,” but the preceding passages show that his interpretation assumes an exuberant, almost apocalyptic tone. The pitch heightens as Ortiz continues. He parallels the poet to those key
figures in his own poems—“the Messiah […] guided by the star that illuminates toward redemption”—but Pedroso appears as a secular “prophet,” engaged in the “secular work” of the “old liberators” that Ortiz holds out in the article’s introduction as a model. Pedroso experiences “premonition” and “revelation” but takes ‘secular’ rather than traditionally ‘religious’ action: he “philosophizes proudly” instead of genuflecting to God. More specifically, Pedroso’s messianism operates within the framework of “social allegory” that exposes “ideological conflict between the promised myth of redemption and the deception of unredeemed humanity.” He never abandons the objective of “redemption” but, with his “thirst for justice,” unrelentingly critiques hypocritical “ideology.” These characterizations of Pedroso encapsulate Ortiz’s vision of the developed Cuban intellect: socially engaged, critical, drawing upon all available resources.

Still, Ortiz does not want to paint the prophetic, messianic Pedroso as singular. He is exemplary and embodies what everyone could and perhaps should be. More immediately, Pedroso represents for Ortiz what Cuba already is. Like Pedroso, the entire nation is “mulatto” and simultaneously possesses “distinct attitudes” that, by their very juxtaposition, are revelatory. Ironically, the purity of Cuba’s religiosity, embodied and revealed by Pedroso, derive from its amalgamated quality. Ortiz seizes upon this irony as he attempts to redeem perceived sources of Cuban underdevelopment as the ground of the island’s prophetic nature. ‘Mulatto’ religiosity is rich and textured—unlike Plácido’s purely “white” religion —because of numerous racial and cultural confluences. Yet, this ideal religiosity does not necessarily correlate to any of the religious elements themselves but rather to the simultaneity that allows for an overcoming of them. The juxtaposition of elements enables the transcendence of specificity into a pure, undifferentiated cultural “essence.”
As he continues, Ortiz highlights this critical dynamic. Ostensibly, he has been talking only about Pedroso’s messianic spirit, but he suddenly proclaims “the essence of spirit” embodied in “mulatto-ness”—“mulatez”—as revealed through poesía mulata

The three phases of religious evolution are reflected in Afro-Cuban lyric: the gods emerge, the gods triumph, the gods die. Mana, myth, and science. The same stained-glass window of the temple filters diverse colorations according to the sun's position at twilight or at its zenith. Mulatez refracts different shades according to the angle at which the sun kisses it. Thus some will be able to see in the lyric of Pedroso and of the poets, like him, who sing of the coming of redemptions, an essence of religiosity. (59; first italic in original)

Ortiz’s metaphor for mulatez is striking not only for its vividness but also in its ironic implications. Typically, “mulatto-ness” indicates specificity of color. Ortiz inverts that sense of particularity and aligns mulatez with pure, undifferentiated light and with the prism that “filters diverse colorations.” As the entire spectrum of color as well as its refracting agent, mulatez has no hue of its own. As the “essence of religiosity” Ortiz’s “mulatez” does not stand for purity of color but rather for that fundamental reality illuminated in the flash of white light, namely the longing for salvation and the primordial base from which redemption issues forth.

In the next sentences, Ortiz adds more force to his images. While most of the audience already may understand the implications of his logic—as “essence of religiosity,” mulatez also exposes the essence of humanity—Ortiz makes the point clear. Pedroso’s “laments,” as the embodiment of mulatez, “will resonate with many like prophetic verses and like songs of that hope that is more than the fear in religion but rather that biotic desire for
overcoming that is the definite essence of all religiosity, already outside of all dogmatisms and theological ethics” (59). 82

With that statement, Ortiz purportedly arrives through mulatez at the arche, at the opening from which all human life unfolds. Pedroso’s verse enables the “descent, through magic,” into the “magma of the sacred” where a universal “biotic desire for overcoming” resides. In Ortiz’s system, that impulse exists always “already outside of all dogmatisms and theological ethics” and any other historically specific system of ideas; religiosity endures across human history as one, if not the only, of its unchanging elements. Accordingly, humanity’s critical challenge is to control religiosity, to channel it in productive directions. Otherwise, the “biotic desire for overcoming,” with its brute force, can lead humans toward their own destruction.

By this route, Ortiz’s theory of religiosity brings him once again to considerations of policy and politics. How should religiosity be controlled? The last portion of Ortiz’s inaugural address takes up such questions by moving further away from its opening call for “documentary objectivity and serene analysis” and deeper into prophecy. In the previous section of the talk, he had insisted, “The day that culture opens the doors of the black temples and mulatto genius knows how to make use of their aesthetic treasures, humanity will receive the gift of a prodigious art that will give new value to the universal qualities of Cuba” (42). In bringing his speech to a close, Ortiz develops that visionary proposition. He already has underscored the invaluable consequences to humanity in releasing “a prodigious art” from its now-exclusive enclosure in “black temples.” When he returns to the idea, he marks off more

82“Sus endechas resonarán a muchos como versículos proféticos y como cantos de esa esperanza que es más que el temor en la religión, de ese anhelo biótico de superación que es la esencia definida de toda religiosidad, ya fuera de todos los dogmatismos y éticas teologales.”
immediate economic and political consequences for Cuba. Ortiz figures “culture,” if only it would “open the doors of the black temples,” as the advanced front—the literal avant-garde—of a social revolution. The release of “aesthetic treasures” from “black temples” could generate, to invoke once again Walter Benjamin’s phrase, powerful ‘energies of intoxication’ that can transform society...if “mulatto genius knows how to make use” of the liberated “art.”

12.

Ortiz’s path to a revolutionary politics of culture passes through more familiar forms of political thought. To set up his conclusion, he juxtaposes seemingly disparate, presumably nonreligious—and some explicitly antireligious—ideologies as a way to prove that all belief-systems stem from religiosity. He defers to the work of Luis Raugier to prove the point, incorporating various citations of Raugier’s into his own statements: "Proletarian revolutionarism all over the world, ‘which communist propaganda offers against orthodox religion, is not a scientific rationalism inspired by the French encyclopedists, Anglo-Saxon empiricism, or logicism of the school of Hegel: it is the ancient hope of the Judeo-Christian apocalypse, transported to Marxist language.’” This discourse, ‘opposed to traditional faith, is not precisely a positivist conception of the Universe and of society, but rather a new mysticism, the messianism of the proletariat that should [...] realize without defect a society without classes, living in a reign of economic exuberance, the true reign of God [...]. When one asks how a people have been able to pass from one religious faith to an absolute atheism, the answer is easy: it happens through a simple phenomenon of substitution’[...]. Soviet antireligiosity translates in this way as a substitution of some fallen creeds for others of ideology synchronic with the scientific materialism of the day. And that perhaps would be how one could interpret the attitude of Pedroso. (59-60)
Ortiz concludes, “In all forms”—whether as proletarian revolutionarism, Soviet antireligiosity, Judeo-Christian apocalypticism—“it is the same driving impulse.”

But, at that point, Ortiz comes upon an important theoretical clarification: the “biotic desire for overcoming” was a materialist compulsion. Religiosity pushes humans toward the redemption of needs in this world:

More food, more luck in the hunt, more fertility for females, better harvests in the country, more wisdom for the elders, more mastery of nature, a better life, more love and more justice, desire for redemption, hope for the messianic journey to the promised land… Always hope as biological imperative; transcendence as vital impulse. (60; ellipses in original)

The Nietzschean overtones of Ortiz’s argument surface in these passages and soon become even more apparent. The characterization of religiosity reinforce the paradoxical idea that familiar forms of “religion,” as institutional systems like the Catholic Church, actually suppress the most “vital” aspects of religiosity. As Ortiz has hinted in preceding portions of his talk, the ostensibly “religious” rejection of material desires in the name of a ‘higher,’ spiritual fulfillment amount to life-denying means to power through the “sublimation” of the “biological imperative” toward “a better life” in the here-and-now.

These passages demonstrate Ortiz’s effort to develop an alternate materialist criticism that could circumvent the shortcomings of contemporary Marxism. The assessment of “proletarian revolutionarism” as a new form of “messianism” shows how Ortiz, in a move

83Ortiz did not mention Nietzsche by name in the lecture. However, moments later he invokes Nietzsche more directly by referring to certain “sacred rites” as “Dionysian in nature.” The Nietzschean rhetoric surfaces in other passages too when he juxtaposes the life-affirming “Dionysian” mysticism of African practices with the ascetic “Apollonian” institutionalism of European Christianity. At one point, Ortiz describes “black mysticism” as “nothing but the sublimation of the desire to live” (here in this world) while “white religion” entails “the longing to die one time in order to live always” (in another world) (51). A few years later, in his famous Contrapunteo cubano [Cuban Counterpoint] (1940), Ortiz did make explicit mention of Nietzsche but only in a few passing remarks (e.g. “Nietzsche might have called sugar Dionysian and tobacco Apollonian.” (Ortiz 1995: 17)). Despite the limited number of citations, Ortiz’s papers reveal that he was actively reading and processing Nietzsche during the late 1930s. Some of those notes have turned up in recent years in organizing Ortiz’s extensive archives for the Fernando Ortiz Library. See InterAmericas 1998 and Font 2005 for further information on Ortiz’s engagements with Nietzschean thought.
typical of early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse, draws on Nietzsche and Marx in an attempt to come up with a materialist perspective born of and applicable to the Americas. Ortiz strives for a critical perspective that will stand as a *cubanismo*. His sly citationality transforms other discourses as part of his own, as exemplified by his literal incorporation of Luis Raugier’s words into his text. “Communist propaganda,” “scientific rationalism,” “French encyclopedists,” “Anglo-Saxon empiricism,” “logicism of the school of Hegel”: all of these post-Enlightenment discourses lead toward the critical ground of marked off by Ortiz’s lecture as it embraces a fundamental “religiosity” that those other “positivist” ideologies have rejected. Ortiz seeks a “divinely inverted,” “just” society lost amidst rampant rationalism. Like the early-nineteenth-century Romantics and the Surrealists of his own day, he looks to place where vital energies of intoxication surge forth. At the end of the lecture, the invocation of Pedroso’s “frenzy of premonition” and “ecstasy of revelation” point Ortiz back to where he had begun his discourse: to the “religious rites” of “the black Afro-American,” so full of “intense collective emotionality.”

In the published transcript of Ortiz’s inaugural speech, the last two pages are set off by three centered marks (60):

* * *

One can almost hear Ortiz pausing to catch his breath before driving toward his last word: “liberation.” In the wake of his characterization of Pedroso as prophet, Ortiz lets loose with a prophecy of his own. He also reinforces the idea that his prophetic role ties in with the ritualistic nature of his speech.
Ortiz reminds his audience of the limitations of *poesía mulata*. He agrees with the remarks of “a Spanish literary observer” who, having seen “certain recitations of Eusebia Cosme,” celebrated “that halo of religiosity that at times Afro-Cuban poetry exhales.” Still, *poesía mulata*—even when recited by Cosme (“the high priestess of a new cultus”)—lacks something. Its religiosity is always of the second order. Ultimately, the poems pose themselves as aesthetic representations of some other experience. The poets and performers always separate themselves from their subjects. For instance, Guillén “mocks” the magic of his own poems, and Pedroso insists on speaking in “social parable.” Their work exhibits ardent religiosity, but neither Guillén nor Pedroso—both committed Socialists—want to acknowledge the profound religious parameters of their efforts. In a single sentence, Ortiz encapsulates the critical issue that surfaces out of his entire discussion: “The recitation of the new poetics—we repeat the point now—cannot give the emotive and aesthetic splendor of the liturgical act in its collective plentitude […] as an utmost and communitarian euphoric exaltation of life” (60).

With that conclusion about the shortcomings of “the new poetics,” Ortiz has come to the heart of the matter. He has identified what modern Cuba lacks and what it most needs: some semblance of a “liturgical act” full of “collective plentitude” and “communitarian euphoric exaltation of life.” But how could a society that Ortiz, in the course of his discussion, has described as openly dismissive of institutional religion come to participate enthusiastically in a “liturgical act in its collective plentitude”?

Ortiz gives an answer, but not a straight one. He launches into a prophecy that tells the audience clearly enough what, in his view, needs to be done:

One day we will see in Cuba those rites—sacred, Dionysian—emerge into the light of day like picturesque surprises, disguised as carnivals to bait tourists,
and the magic power of money will speak the 'Open Sesame!' that will make [the ceremonies] come out of the crypts. (60-1)84

With this vision of the future, Ortiz’s discussion spirals back on itself. He begins by framing his speech and SEAC’s inauguration as a rite of passage for Cuban society, moves into considerations of “the religious rites” of “the black Afro-American,” and passes through an argument about the material and materialistic impulse of religiosity at the root of all human activity . . . . And he follows that course to arrive at an end that lies close to where he had started. His prophecy announces that Cuban society needs more rites of passages, with his speech serving as a model. But among a notoriously skeptical people, the ceremonies also will have to be deliberate acts of profanation: Cubans should coax “sacred rites”—by definition, sanctuary-centered procedures—pro fanum, ‘outside the temple,’ and into the nation’s streets during “the light of day.” That conscious, profane displacement will release the ceremonies’ transformative “Dionysian” energies into the public at-large.

But how exactly would the profanation of “those sacred, Dionysian rites” have such profound effects “one day in Cuba”? According to Ortiz, the most immediate consequences would be economic. Those effects could set off a far-reaching chain of reactions. As he indicates, the entire process of social transformation revolves around a primary deception intended to infuse capital into Cuba’s economy: “sacred rites” had to be exuberant—or, more specifically, “Dionysian in nature”—so as to appear like “carnivals” that can effectively “bait tourists.” Ortiz reminds his audience that Cuban religious and political authorities have already proposed commercialized religious ceremonies as a form of tourist-bait. In a statement—one posed as a question—Ortiz notes how, for reasons more economic than

84“Un día veremos en Cuba esos ritos sagrados, dionisíacos, salir a la luz del día como surpresas pintorescas, disfrazadas de carnaval para cebo de turistas, y la potente magia del dinero dirá el sésamo ábrete que las hará salir de las criptas.”
spiritual, some cities have discussed the possibilities of street celebrations that mimic famous Catholic traditions:

Has it not already been suggested, for the pecuniary greed of industrial tourism, that the old Catholic processions of Cuaresma be resuscitated and that in ancient Trinidad—or in the haven of Guanabacoa—the picturesque hooded rows leave their churches for Holy Week, as in Andalucia, with candles and floats, with images of Via Crucis and clerics that softly sing to themselves the lugubrious psalms of those sorrowful days that precede the Pascal holiday of Christianity? (61)\textsuperscript{85}

How can Ortiz accuse the proponents of these events of “pecuniary greed”\textsuperscript{?} Why would the proceedings that Ortiz suggests be any different? Is not his own plan to “bait tourists” also directed toward the “pecuniary” ends of bringing people—and, more importantly, their money—to Cuba and its economy? After all, he admits—indeed,\textit{emphasizes}—that his whole prophecy hinges on “the magic power of money”: Money-bearing tourists will not come without the “bait”—the “sacred rites” that when “disguised as carnivals” look “like picturesque surprises”—but that bait also had to be baited . . . with money! Is not Ortiz’s implication that money-bearing observers would never be enticed by “Dionysian” ceremonies if money did not magically “speak ‘Open sesame!’,” that is, if the rituals themselves were not lured “out of the crypts” by the promise of financial gain? Are the duplicitous tactics Ortiz presents—tricking sacred rites and tourists alike by tempting the former with money and then disguising them as carnivals to fool the latter—any better than the “pecuniary greed” that ostensibly motivate the idea of fake “Catholic processions”?\textsuperscript{85}

Ortiz apparently recognizes the potential hypocrisy of his indictment of “pecuniary greed” since he immediately attempts to distinguish the ethical and economic implications of

\textsuperscript{85}¿No se ha sugerido ya, para las avideces pecunia rias del turismo industrial, que se resuciten las viejas procesiones católicas de Cuaresma y que en la vetusta Trinidad, o en la remansada Guanabacoa, salgan de sus iglesias por Semana Santa, como en Andalucía, las hileras de pintorescos encapuchados, con cirios y \textit{pasos}, con imágenes de \textit{Via Crucis} y clérigos que canturren los salmos lúgubres de aquellos días luctuosos que preceden a la fiesta pascual del cristianismo?\textsuperscript{?}
his vision from his compatriots’ suggestions. He has grouped those events under the category of “industrial tourism,” characterized by “pecuniary greed,” and in order to highlight the contrast he coined a term for the kind of activities he envisioned: “indigenous tourism” [turismo indígena]. As he outlines his conception of this alternative form of tourism, Ortiz points out its economic benefits, but he presents them as only one component of the profound social change engendered by letting “sacred, Dionysian rites emerge into the light of day.” In addition to the commerce tied to the public display of these types of ceremonies, the events would heighten Cuban self-consciousness and, in turn, would inculcate national pride.

“Industrial tourism” derives from non-Cuban traditions—such as the Catholic processions that copied Spanish processions—and serves the interests of foreigners. “Indigenous tourism” would feature homegrown traditions directed primarily at Cuba’s own citizens:

It seems necessary that, at the least—so much as to entertain foreign tourists and to bring them so that they will leave us money—we endeavor to please our own Cuban people, tortured and abandoned, with the same pleasures of their own collective art, and that we sustain a real system of diversions for Cuban tourists in their own land, with the objective of bringing the children of Cuba to the appreciation of their own country. In the end, this ‘indigenous tourism,’ from street to street and from town to town, would have to bring us more substantial benefits than those earned through alien tourism [el turismo alienígena], which includes the fortunate offerings of the restaurateur and the innkeeper on through the less savory elements of prostitution and gambling.

At the end of the passage, Ortiz does not use quotation marks to claim the phrase “alien tourism” as his own, as he does with “‘indigenous tourism.’” Still, the former term is also unique, and its originality is telling. Early in the passage, Ortiz refers to turistas.
extranjeros [“foreign tourists”]. However, instead of later using turismo extranjero [‘foreign tourism,’ or ‘tourism by foreigners’]—the logical and familiar extension of the earlier phrase—Ortiz marks contemporary tourism itself, not to the foreign tourists who participate in it, as “alien” or, in the more precise sense of the term aliénígena, as “alienating.” In other words, Ortiz implies that the state of the “Cuban people” as “tortured and abandoned” related to the treatment of tourism as “industrial,” as nothing more than an industry. Those involved in this tourist industry have only one concern: to make a profit. They pursue that goal through the shortsighted focus on how “to entertain foreign tourists and to bring them [to Cuba] so that they will leave us money.”

In his view, the Cuban versions of Spain’s “old Catholic processions” serve as clear evidence of “the pecuniary greed of industrial tourism” because the parades would have been so inconsistent with the skeptical Cuban character that he discusses earlier in the lecture. Ortiz points out the obvious contradiction:

We doubt that the social force of jest [choteo] would permit in Cuba the reproduction, without irreverent sacrilege, of the solemn ambulatory ceremonies of the Andalucian Church, with its masked penitents and its spectacular disciplinarians, without the aesthetic complement of the admirable polychromatic religious imagery of a Montañés and of the popular Catholic sensibility that sings passionate saetas to the Crucified and to the Virgin Macarena and that traditionally participates in those ambulatory centenary rites with a fervor that the Cuban public does not have, ni puede improvisar ni fingir.

In Ortiz’s view, the proposed processions would amount to nothing more than bait for foreign tourists due to the inevitable discrepancy between Cubans’ “sacrilegious irreverence”

87 “Dudamos que la fuerza social del choteo permita en Cuba reproducir, sin sacrílega irreverencia, las solemnes ceremonias callejeras de la iglesia andaluza, con sus penitentes enmascarados y sus espectaculares disciplinarios, sin el complemento estético de la admirable imaginaria polícroma de un Montañés y de la católica sensibilidad popular que canta saetas apasionadas al Crucificado y a la Virgen Macarena y participa tradicionalmente de esos centenarios ritos desambulatorios, con un fervor que el pueblo cubano no tiene, ni puede improvisar ni fingir.”
and “the solemn ambulatory ceremonies of the Andalucian Church.” While Ortiz’s earlier statements acknowledge that “it seems necessary […] to entertain foreign tourists and to bring them so that they will leave us money,” he also makes clear there that such objectives are not enough. The tourist trade has to “endeavor to please our own Cuban people […] and [to] sustain a real system of diversions for Cuban tourists in their own land, with the objective of bringing the children of Cuba to the appreciation of their own country.” Thus, in presenting the idea of “indigenous tourism,” Ortiz offers a vision of how to incorporate the tricks of industrial tourism into another “system” that would better serve Cubans by educating them about their own culture and history. This new system would instill national pride and would keep Cuban money—along with much-desired foreign capital—circulating through the domestic economy.

Ortiz’s far-reaching strategy for Cuba’s development hinges upon the use of “sacred rites” in a manner consistent with national character. He accentuates the need for “Dionysian” spectacles that, in contrast to “the solemn ambulatory ceremonies of the Andalucian Church,” enable new forums for collective enthusiasm. Public performance of “indigenous” traditions with “African” influences, he suggests, would be particularly effective as the foundation for “indigenous tourism.” He identifies some examples from Cuba’s past in which a “strong African instinct” shaped carnivalesque celebrations that embodied the exuberant spirit of the Cuban people:

We have already had ‘Days of Kings’ and, later, Havana ‘comparsas’, and ‘parrandas’ through the Villareña region of Remedios, and street ‘arrollaos’ through Santiago, as diversions in which the people search for their style and their genius. (61)88

88 Comparsas, parrandas, and arrollaos were types of popular Cuban street processions. In the next chapter, I discuss the comparsas and the Day of Kings. The original Spanish reads: “Ya hemos tenido ‘días de
Ortiz returns again to the prophetic mode, bringing his lecture to a dizzying close, by imagining aloud how these historical cases might shape the future of Cuban society:

Some new street processions, well stimulated and protected by official favor, and some useful carnivals, with rivalries between neighborhoods in the exhibition of monumental lights and floats, supplemented by competitions of music, *pregones* (popular chants, such as by street vendors) and new songs from the cradle of folklore would give hours of amusement to our people, precisely with their own traditions, with that which is their own, with that which the public likes, with that which it desires and has a right to desire. [...] Above all, the incorporation of African liturgies into the common stock of popular and public traditions—and their subsequent aesthetic theatricalization, in stylized and mimodramatic forms—will have to be—and will be one day—a powerful, original, *cubanísima* and inimitable artistic attraction, forged with native elements that await liberation. (61-2)89

As the last word in Ortiz’s January talk, “liberation” lingers on after the passage’s conclusion and echoes back across the preceding text. In using the term, Ortiz explicitly names the goal toward which his entire discussion moves. Does not “liberation” evocatively encapsulate the possibility circumscribed by Ortiz throughout the passage and distilled into his plea to his compatriots to “endeavor to please our own Cuban people, tortured and abandoned” by building “a real system of diversions for Cuban tourists in their own land”? The final “liberation” establishes, once and for all, the aim of the cultural politics that generate the notion of “indigenous tourism.”

Nevertheless, if the last word clearly condenses a desire that propels the January lecture, the parameters of emancipation as invoked by Ortiz become more ambiguous upon

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89“En cambio, unas comparsas bien estimuladas y protegidas por el favor oficial y unas *parrandas* remedianas, con rivalidad de barrios en la exhibición de farolas y carrozas monumentales, acrecida por concursos de músicas, pregones y canciones nuevas de cuna folklórica, darían, y pensamos que darán horas de esparcimiento a nuestro pueblo, precisamente con sus tradiciones, con lo suyo, con lo que a él le gusta, con lo que él quiere y tiene derecho a querer. […] Sobre todo, la incorporación de las liturgias africanas al acervo de las expansiones populares y públicas, y su derivada teatralización estética, en formas estilizadas y mimodramáticas, habrán de ser, y serán un día, una poderosa, original, *cubanísima* e inimitable atracción artística, forjada con elementos nativos que esperan una liberación.”
reflection on the concluding remarks. After all, what kind of “liberation” does Ortiz mean? Who or what would be set free, and how so? Significantly, Ortiz’s final passage, when taken literally, does not refer to the release of “tortured and abandoned” Cubans into a new state of sovereignty. Rather, “native elements”—specifically, the “African liturgies” identified earlier in the sentence—“await liberation.” In this regard, Ortiz simply brings his concluding remarks full circle: he begins them by prophesizing about the emancipation of “sacred rites” that will “emerge into the light of day”; he ends the lecture by reinforcing the image of the ceremonies’ release, asserting that they actually “await liberation.” Still, these two visions of uncaging at either end of the conclusion frame Ortiz’s discussion about “industrial tourism” as a major factor in the tortuous limitations imposed on the Cuban pueblo’s development. By implication, the discharge of “African liturgies” would enable the pueblo’s “liberation,” and the final passages make the connection more directly. The emergence of the “African” “sacred rites, Dionysian in nature,” would unshackle and then satisfy a currently repressed need: the “amusement to our people, precisely with their own traditions, with that which is their own, with that which the public likes, with that which it desires and has a right to desire.”

However, the unmistakable link that Ortiz establishes between the “liberation” of “native elements” and of the Cuban pueblo manages to complicate the picture. A fundamental issue remains: in what specific ways does Ortiz see the two emancipations as related? Ortiz’s second-to-last word raises the question of agency. For whom or for what are “native elements” waiting as they “await liberation”? Once again, this final phrase gestures back a few passages. In his initial image of release, Ortiz implies that the ceremonies do not “emerge into the light of day” entirely of their own volition; they only enter the public sphere
by an external power that “makes” them come out of the crypts.” So who or what does Ortiz figure as the liberators of “African liturgies” and, in turn, of Cuba’s “tortured and abandoned” population? What kind of force sets the process in motion by bringing “Dionysian” ceremonies “outside their temples”?

In the initial iteration, Ortiz suggests that “money,” with its “magic power,” is the catalyzing force that “will make [them] leave their crypts.” Ortiz then rewrites that scenario, pointing more directly to human agents as the pivotal intermediaries. He suggests that well-informed intellectuals and government functionaries, in particular, would control the process of Cuba’s social transformation. In envisioning the public spectacles that would be at the heart of “indigenous tourism”—the “parades” and “carnivals” and “contests of music,” so full of “rivalries” and “monumental lights and floats” and other excesses that “would give hours of amusement to our people”—Ortiz indicates that such ribaldry would have to be promoted by and regulated through apparatuses of the state. In his description, any such event that would serve the necessary purposes has to be “well stimulated and protected by official favor.” He proceeds to reinforce this idea of “official” control over events: the effectiveness of “African liturgies” on public life depended upon their “incorporation” and “aesthetic theatricalization.” In other words, some people—presumably non-practitioners who possess or represent “official favor”—would not only “liberate” Dionysian rituals but also would “incorporate” and “theatricalize” them as they “emerge” from their private sanctuaries “into the light of day.”

By placing political and cultural elites at the center of his prophetic vision, Ortiz resolves one apparent tension while he creates another. “Aesthetic theatricalizations,” organized by elites and adopted by skeptical population, demand self-consciousness. All of
the actors take part with certain intentions and desires for the transformation of modern society. Based on Ortiz’s discussion, that desired social revitalization requires spontaneous, primal experience. But how can that kind of primal experience be achieved among a self-conscious population? It seems that reflexivity, the theorization of experience, is Ortiz’s only way out, and that path points the audience right back to the just-completed lecture. His theory of religiosity has been magical all along according to its own terms. Ortiz implicitly situates his talk as a manifestation of religiosity—of “that biotic desire to overcome,” of a will to power—that, like “magic,” seeks to channel the circulation of power in the world.

It is precisely that effort to redirect “destiny” that Nicolás Guillén also undertakes with his writing. My next chapter focuses on Guillén’s magic as related to, but still distinct from, the magic at work in the official inauguration of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies on January 16, 1937.
CHAPTER 4: MAKING HISTORY: SACRIFICE, REDEMPTION, AND NICOLÁS GUILLÉN’S TEXTUAL ENCHANTMENTS (1951)

Guillén himself says that it is [...] a magic rite, that it is a ‘song’ like songs were at their origin, a ‘chant,’ an ‘enchantment.’

Fernando Ortiz

I already know: there is ‘the marked day,’ as fatalists say. Destiny! Of course, the idea is consoling because it searches for a way to help us accept the consummate fact, bowing our head before the inevitable. I reject it.

Nicolás Guillén

Men make their own history, [...] but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.

Karl Marx

1.

After the official inauguration of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies in January 1937, what happened next? The organization’s subsequent activities reveal that Ortiz, as SEAC’s President, led the group’s effort to bring to fruition the strategic vision that he had presented at the conclusion of his inaugural address. In the closing paragraphs of the speech, Ortiz had imagined how “one day we will see in Cuba those rites—sacred, Dionysian—emerge into the light of day.” He had issued a call for a new system of “‘indigenous tourism’” based on “the incorporation of African liturgies into the common stock of popular and public traditions, and their subsequent aesthetic theatricalization, in stylized and mimodramatic forms.” Ortiz specifically envisioned “some new parades [comparsas], well stimulated and protected by
official favor, and some useful carnivals [parrandas], with rivalries between neighborhoods in the exhibition of monumental lights and floats, supplemented by competitions of music.”

Most of the Society’s endeavors after its inauguration pushed directly toward Ortiz’s objectives. The group’s official archives identify its organization of and involvement with various performances during 1937. Many of the presentations represented the kinds of “aesthetic theatricalizations” of “sacred, Dionysian rites” that Ortiz apparently had in mind. For instance, on May 30, Ortiz presided over what was billed as an “ethnographic concert that gave a schematic exposition of the character, instruments, music, liturgical songs and dances of the sacred music of the black Yoruba.” According to SEAC’s records, a re-enactment of an Afro-Cuban “sacred rite” followed Ortiz’s “schematic exposition” of the ceremony’s critical musical components. The official description of the May 30 event echoes key terms from Ortiz’s January inaugural speech: “sacred,” “liturgical,” “ethnographic,” “concert” (SEAC 1937: 163). Indeed, in his explanatory lecture on May 30, Ortiz celebrated the event as an initial but absolutely critical step toward the fulfillment of the strategic vision he had offered during his inaugural speech less than five months earlier. In introducing the event in May, Ortiz proudly proclaimed, “Until today these religious songs of the Yoruba in Cuba” that you will encounter tonight “have not left the temples of the blacks” (Ortiz 1937b: 78). Throughout his May talk, Ortiz repeatedly underscored his hope that the “Dionysian exuberance” displayed in the proceedings of the “ethnographic concert,” an “aesthetic theatricalization” of African-derived “liturgies” in Cuba, would unleash transformative energies into the audience that politely sat in Havana’s Campoamor Theater and watched a profane version of a “sacred rite” that finally had “emerged into the light of day” (Ortiz 1937b: passim).
The records of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies identify a number of other “ethnographic concerts” and “aesthetic theatricalizations” of Afro-Cuban “liturgical song and dance” during 1937 and in the years following. The group’s very first involvements show that its efforts were not only ‘political’ in a broad sense. Immediately after its official inauguration in January, the Society turned to a narrower political matter: public policies surrounding a specific cultural expression. The language of Ortiz’s inaugural address further demonstrates that his call for profane, public versions of “sacred, Dionysian rites” included a pressing political agenda.

In identifying the need for “some new parades, well stimulated and protected by official favor,” Ortiz referred to the parades as “comparsas.” In using that term, Ortiz signaled to everyone in the audience the direct relation of his prophecy to contemporary politics. In January 1937, comparsas were a hot-button issue among intellectuals and politicians in Cuba. Although by that time “comparsa” could be used in reference to any troupe of musicians and dancers that paraded through the streets during February’s pre-Lenten carnival celebrations, the origins of the comparsas—and the controversy surrounding them—were well known. The comparsas had developed among slaves on the island and, by the early nineteenth century, already had earned considerable attention in Cuban society as a source of fascination and fear. They emerged as part of the annual celebration of Epiphany on January 6, known in Cuba as “el Día de Reyes” [the Day of Kings]. Colonial religious and political authorities traditionally allowed slaves to participate in the Epiphany processions, which for centuries had been among the most important popular celebrations in cities and towns throughout Spain. In the Cuban context, slaves had used the processions as opportunities to re-enact other, African-inflected traditions. Slaves would move through the
streets as part of the processions, but the *comparsas*—the groups of slave musicians and dancers—would stand out amidst the overt Catholic imagery. The dancers moved wildly, with many of them dressed as so-called “diablitos”—‘little devils’—in spectacular costumes based on famous western African ritual styles. The music also seemed to derive from Africa, as the singers would repeat chants in unfamiliar languages according to complex rhythmic structures laid down on handmade drums.

In a much-celebrated 1925 study, Ortiz describes the *comparsas* and their meaning:

A troupe of Negroes leaping, dancing, and singing, carried on their backs, through the streets of Havana, an enormous, artificial serpent several meters long, stopping before the big houses where they would be given a Christmas bonus. The scene represented the death of the snake and the celebration of its characteristics: ‘Look at his eyes, they look like flame / and look at his teeth, the look like needles.’ With the snake stretched out on the ground, they danced around it, singing to it, ending with: ‘The snake is dead / Calabasón, són, són.’ (Ortiz 1925: 41)

According to Ortiz, the Day of Kings celebrations amounted to a complex social drama that revolved around magic. The “troupe of Negroes” reproduced a traditional African rite amidst the Epiphany processions in order to unleash magical spells aimed at liberation. The snake, Ortiz explains, represented the white oppressors that the group of “leaping, dancing, and singing” slaves ritually, efficaciously killed. As Ortiz highlights, the power of this magic depended for the *comparsa* upon its ability to carry out the ritual in front of the masters themselves: the whole drama took place within officially authorized religious observances that led the slaves “before the big houses where they would be given a Christmas bonus.”

But, as Ortiz also emphasizes, the masters caught on to this magic at work in their midst and directed at the undoing of their power. Throughout the nineteenth century, many people called for a ban on the *comparsas*, which almost all contemporary observers characterized as spectacular but frightening. Beginning in 1880, Cuba’s colonial authorities officially
outlawed the *comparsas* on the grounds that, with the imminent end of slavery, the tradition was no longer necessary.

Accordingly, Ortiz’s reference in his inaugural lecture to “some new *comparsas*, well stimulated and protected by official favor,” signaled the openly political move he had in mind. And, indeed, the very first activities of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies after its official January 1937 inauguration related to the group’s effort to overturn the fifty-six-year-old ban on the *comparsas*. The Society, led by Ortiz, pressed Havana’s political leaders on the issue, and exactly two weeks after the organization’s inaugural event the mayor of Havana released a notice calling for public debate about reinstatement of the *comparsas*.

SEAC’s official records include the following note of one of the group’s first endeavors:

In response to the request issued by the Mayor of Havana, Dr. Antonio Beruff Mendieta, on January 30, 1937, the Society released a report, edited by its President, Dr. Fernando Ortiz, and approved by the Executive Council, pronouncing itself in favor of the reinstatement of the popular Havana *comparsas*. The report was published as a twelve-page pamphlet edited by the City of Havana and released with the title ‘The Popular *Comparsas* of Havana Carnival: A Decisive Question.’ (162)

The next entry in the records indicates that the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies continued to push the matter in the weeks following Ortiz’s inaugural lecture:

During the *February Festivals of 1937*, organized in Cuba’s capital by the Department of Municipal Tourism and its Planning Commission, various member of the Society formed part of the Panel that determined the prizes for the popular *comparsas* that paraded through the streets of Havana during the days of Carnival. (162; italics in original)

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90“A solicitud formulada en 30 de enero de 1937, por el Sr. Alcalde Municipal de La Habana, Dr. Antonio Beruff Mendieta, la Sociedad emitió un informe, redactado por su Presidente el Dr. Fernando Ortiz, y aprobado por la Junta Ejecutiva, pronunciándose en favor del resurgimiento de las comparsas populares habaneras, informe que fue publicado en el folleto que editó el Municipal de La Habana con el título de *Las comparsas populares del carnaval habanero, cuestión resuelta*, La Habana, 1937, p. 9-20.”

91“Durante las *Fiestas de Febrero de 1937*, organizadas en esta Capital por el Departamento de Turismo Municipal y su Comisión Asesora, varios miembros de la Sociedad formaron parte de los Jurados que
As notes on discussions among members of SEAC reveal, the group understood that the “popular comparsas” of the pre-Lenten festivities related to the old Day of Kings comparsas but that the Carnival versions were not as openly “African” or as resolutely “magical.” Nevertheless, the Society saw those other comparsas as a path toward reinstatement of Day of Kings comparsa traditions and, more broadly, as important pieces in Ortiz’s plan for a system of “indigenous tourism.”

But why did Ortiz and other members of SEAC even bother with the issue in 1937? Was not the Day of Kings comparsa a colonial tradition, a folkloric component of a slave-based society that had passed away half-a-century ago? Again, Ortiz’s inaugural lecture had circumscribed the logic for what seemed like an untimely political maneuver. As he had stated in concluding his January talk, he did not want to revive the traditional comparsas but rather some “new comparsas, well stimulated and protected by official favor.” The objective Ortiz had laid down for the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies was the dispersal of magical “African liturgies” out their “crypts” and into Cuba’s public spaces. The “pueblo” would seize upon the “Dionysian” energies of the liberated “sacred rites” with its own “stylized” but still-exuberant versions of the rituals. Most of all, members of the Society hoped that the new comparsas would mimic the old ones as magical confrontations to dissemble social oppression. The group saw a latent magic in the appropriating some “primitive magic.”

In the course of his inaugural lecture, Ortiz identified Nicolás Guillén’s 1932 poem “Sensemayá” as a small step in that direction. He pegged the verse as the embodiment of a new, profane, dissembling magic that gestured toward a reconfigured and more effective politics of culture. By way of a reconsideration of Ortiz’s critical analysis of “Sensemayá,” I

discernieron los premios a las comparsas populares que desfilaron durante los días de Carnaval por las calles de La Habana.”
focus in the remainder of this chapter on magic in “Sensamayá” and in a later, lesser-known essay by Guillén. Those pieces demonstrate how Guillen’s work served as a major but unique thread in the twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse of displacing magic.

2.

Due to the long-running ban on the Afro-Cuban comparsas, Ortiz’s 1925 study relied entirely on historical materials. In turn, his monograph almost single-handedly revived popular interest in the tradition. By the late 1920s, the Day of Kings comparsas had emerged as a central symbol in the modernist intellectual movement that became known as “afrocubanismo,” or “Afro-Cubanism.” As discussed in the previous chapter, the single most renowned “Afro-Cubanist” work during the period was—and still remains—Nicolás Guillén’s poem, “Sensemayá.” For that reason Ortiz focused on the work in the January 1937 lecture about “religion in poesía mulata.” Ortiz’s discussion of “Sensemayá” created a strange circularity of discourse since, as Guillén had explained on a number of occasions, the poem materialized in response to Ortiz’s 1925 monograph. In a later interview, Guillén recalled the circumstances:

It was January 6, 1932, the Day of Kings. I was in bed sick in a Havana hotel […] where I was staying. It may have been the enforced idleness that gave wings to my thoughts, flying backward toward my infancy. Ever since I was a child, in my homeland Camagüey, one of the black people’s songs had kept resounding in my ears, a popular song composed for killing a snake: “Sambala culembe; sambala culembe . . . ” How, and why, did that song come to me then? Perhaps because I had been reading the pages of Fernando Ortiz, the ones about black sorcerers, maybe it was the spirit of that day, the evocation of what had existed in colonial Cuba, the Día de Reyes. The day that was awaited, the only one, the great magnificent day on which the black slaves would get permission from their white masters to feel as though at home in their own land.
and sing and dance in the warmth of their own family and their tribe and worship their gods and again be subjects of their king.\textsuperscript{92}

Guillén’s recollections, coupled with Ortiz’s analyses, offer powerful reminders of the critical dynamic at work in the two writers’ circuit of discourse. In the 1925 monograph, Ortiz emphasizes how the \textit{comparsas} functioned as a displaced and displacing magic: with the slave trade, a traditional African magical rite had made its way to the streets of nineteenth-century Havana, where the ritual re-enactment of killing a snake re-emerged as another magical undertaking to displace colonial powers and their systems of oppression. Inspired by Ortiz’s analysis of “black sorcerers” and their historical role during the Day of Kings, Guillén constructed his own poetic representation of the ritual less than seven years after the publication of Ortiz’s study. And then, almost exactly five years after the experiences that inspired Guillén’s work, Ortiz returned the favor with a critical examination of the by-now-famous 1932 poem.

Significantly, in his analysis of “Sensamayá” Ortiz compares it to the displaced and displacing Afro-Cuban magic ritual that Guillén recalled from his own childhood, as mediated by Ortiz’s earlier writings. As Ortiz summarized in his January 1937 remarks on “Sensemayá,” the poem operates as a form of magic intended, like the outlawed \textit{comparsas}, to unsettle conditions of social injustice through the creation of aesthetic correspondences. In 1925, Ortiz pointed out how the magical rites on the Day of Kings “represented the death of the snake and the celebration of its characteristics”; in 1937, he described Guillén’s poem in similar terms. “Guillén himself says that [“Sensemayá”] is a magic rite, that it is a ‘song’ like songs were at their origin, a ‘chant,’ an ‘enchantment.’” Ortiz’s key point is that, like the ceremony that it portrays, Guillén’s poem relies on the efficacious power of patterned words.

\textsuperscript{92}Augier 1965: 212-13, as cited and translated in Benítez-Rojo 1996: 296.
In the ritual described in “Sensamayá,” “the trembling reptile succumbs to the conjuring of sacred words,” and the poem itself tries to mimic that conjuring effect. The Day of Kings comparsas and “Sensemayá”—as “magic rites”, as “‘chants’” and “‘enchantments’”—both unfold paradoxically: as allegories of sacrificial killings intended to defuse social violence. In Ortiz’s estimation, that paradox—repeating certain words in order to make the opposite happen—typifies “magic” as embodied in and as Guillén’s poem.

It is important to recall that, in his January 1937 lecture, Ortiz takes Guillén to task for his portrayal of magic in “Sensemayá.” According to Ortiz, the poem operates as a powerful magical spell, but Guillén distances himself too far from the ‘primitive’ magic that his poem portrays. He readily acknowledges, even proclaims, the magical parameters of “Sensemayá,” but as Ortiz points out Guillén and other “mulatto poets of the day no longer believe in the gods of their black grandparents. And [they] even mock [those] contraptions of magic and witchcraft” (Ortiz 1937a: 43). In verging on mockery of primitive magic in the name of a secular, modernist magic, Guillén missed the essential connection. In Ortiz’s estimation, Guillén mistakes his narrative techniques as the source of the poem’s magic; “Sensemayá” relies too heavily on “mere descriptive narration.” In Ortiz’s reading, the real magic of “Sensemayá” lies in its desire for redemption—that is, in its underlying “religiosity”—more than with its aesthetic tricks. The impact of the verse stems from its attempt to invert deadly violence—the oppressive force of slavery carried into the killing of the snake—into a vital source of life for the social group.93

93In The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and Postmodern Perspective, Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996) builds on Ortiz’s work in presenting the argument that the redemptive thrust of Guillén’s “Sensemayá” exemplifies Caribbean cultural production in general. See especially Benítez-Rojo’s discussion of the poem in the last essay (“Carnival”) in his collection.
Ortiz’s criticism of “Sensemayá” is pivotal, at many levels. First, the discussion of Guillén’s famous poem marks a turning point in “Religion in Poesía Mulata.” Ortiz’s critique of Guillén set up his vision of a new politics of culture that would build on and ultimately transcend the afrocubanism represented by “Sensemayá.” After his discussion of Guillén’s work, Ortiz offers Pedroso’s verse as an alternative that moves beyond “mere narrative description” toward open acknowledgement of religiosity and toward greater “documentary analysis.” In other words, the considerations of “Sensemayá” enable Ortiz to arrive at his vision of a new breed of Afro-Cuban studies that generates actual ritual experiences instead of merely offering literary or aesthetic representations of socially revitalizing “sacred, Dionysian rites.”

As I want to demonstrate over the course of my discussion, Ortiz’s reading of “Sensemayá” serves as the structural pivot in the January 1937 talk, which in turn stands as an historical hinge in the development of Afro-Cuban studies. With his criticism of “Sensemayá,” Ortiz tried to enact a self-conscious break in Afro-Cuban studies with its own modernist, “Afro-Cubanist” past. He hoped to turn portrayals of Afro-Cuban history and culture away from what he considered aestheticist pretensions, that is, the idea that image-makers could incorporate ostensibly “Afro-Cuban” elements in any way they saw fit. From that standpoint, Ortiz’s critique of Guillén in certain respects anticipated Carpentier’s attack on the Surrealists eleven years later. In noting how “mulatto poets of the day no longer believe in the gods of their black grandparents [a]nd even mock contraptions of magic and witchcraft,” Ortiz foreshadowed Carpentier’s 1948 dismissal of the “lack of faith” among European aesthetes and his subsequent demand for revolutionary “chronicles” of American history and culture.
Ortiz quickly moved away from “Sensemayá” toward his discussion of the revitalizing force of religiosity in Pedroso’s work and beyond, but a fair account of Afro-Cuban studies cannot dismiss Guillén too quickly. I want to linger for a while longer on Ortiz’s reading of “Sensemayá” in order to show that, fundamentally, his analysis of Guillén’s work is right on target. In fact, in emphasizing how “Sensemayá” operates as a “magic rite” based on “the conjuring power of words,” Ortiz identifies a critical dynamic that structures Guillén’s production more generally. Guillén did typically figure his writing as magical, but his conceptions of intellectual magic did not coincide exactly with the notions of Ortiz and other Cuban intellectuals. In that way, Ortiz’s 1937 critique of “Sensemayá” hints at significant differences within the early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse. Guillén’s position is a distinct form of displacing magic.

Unlike many of his colleagues in the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies, Guillén did not turn his focus in the late 1930s to the production of profane versions of “sacred, Dionysian rites.” Instead, he remained committed to the space of the text as the site where socially revitalizing, magical rituals could unfold. Even as his subject matter deliberately moved away from ‘primitive’ themes, Guillén continued to develop the critical notion at work in “Sensemayá”: that, in modern life, a literary representation—a poem, an essay, historiography, or other types of text—could serve the revitalizing, redemptive function that rituals held in non-modern societies. “Mere narrative description”—the point of Ortiz’s critique of Guillén—was enough. Moderns did not need to participate in a collective re-enactment of a sacrificial killing. The experience of reading well-executed writing could have socially transformative, ritualistic effects. While non-moderns had to enact a collective portrayal of sacrificial death in order to give new life to the community, moderns could
exorcise and prevent social violence through an ingenious *textual* or *aesthetic* representation. With “Sensemayá,” Guillén wanted to do exactly what Ortiz decries about the poem: replace collective ritual with the revolutionary experience of textual magic.

I know of no record of Guillén’s reaction to Ortiz’s analysis of “Sensemayá.” As one of the Vice Presidents of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies, Guillén was at the front and center of Ortiz’s audience during the organization’s official inauguration on January 16, 1937. As Guillén’s recollections about the origins of “Sensamayá” suggest, Ortiz’s work fascinated and inspired him. Guillén frequently expressed his admiration for Ortiz as a scholar, as a person, and as a friend.94 As I mean to highlight, the work of Ortiz and Guillén, two of the most famous intellectuals in Cuban history, connect at many levels. But, ultimately, what distinguishes Ortiz, Guillén, and other Cuban intellectuals from each other is their level of commitment to Marxism. Ortiz’s inaugural address shows his interest in Marxian theoretics, but even after the 1959 Revolution Ortiz never adopted an openly Marxist political rhetoric. Guillén and other members of the younger generation of Cuban intellectuals established more direct Marxist affiliations. Those commitments to Marxism would shape in important ways the different forms of displacing magic that surfaced within Cuban intellectual discourse of the period.

In the rest of this chapter, I examine a short 1951 essay by Guillén in order to delineate the unique Marxist parameters of Guillén’s insistence on the magical powers of textuality. Guillén’s piece creates yet-another curious circuit of discourse. The essay serves as a eulogy for Rómulo Lachatañeré: a good friend of Guillén, another committed Marxist, and another of the founding members and prominent figures in the Society for Afro-Cuban

94For instance, see Guillén’s tributes (1969a; 1969b) upon the occasion of Ortiz’s death in 1969.
Studies. Written almost two decades after “Sensemayá,” Guillén’s tribute to his fallen comrade differs substantially in form and content from the famous 1932 poem. Nevertheless, the 1951 piece moves in fundamentally the same direction as “Sensamayá.” Like the earlier verse, the eulogy centers on an untimely death—in this case, Lachatañeré’s—and portrays a communal redemption of that fatality as a revolutionary, life-giving event. In both of Guillén’s pieces, textualization, the process of writing, functions as means of redemption. That act of vindication is a form of magic that spirals out from one of Marx’s most familiar statements.

3.

Among the many quotable fragments from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, one line especially has served as a manifesto on its own: “Men make their own history, […] but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1964: 15). Ever since the publication of the text in 1851, Marx’s famous statement has been used to celebrate the force of free will over circumstantial determinants. Exactly one hundred years after the release of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Guillén invoked and reflected upon Marx’s dictum on the occasion of Rómulo Lachatañeré’s untimely and unsettling passing. Lachatañeré died on Friday, April 11, 1951, just over three months shy of his forty-second birthday. He was returning by plane to New York, where he had lived since 1939, from San Juan, Puerto Rico. Shortly after take-off, the flight crew of the DC-4 carrying Lachatañeré and around 60 other passengers notified the air-traffic controllers back in San Juan that one of the plane’s four engines had failed and that the aircraft needed to return for an emergency landing. Instead, the plane plunged into the sea a few miles before the Bay of
San Juan. A number of people—including most of the crew—survived the crash, but Lachatañeré and fifty-one others perished.

Guillén, who befriended Lachatañeré when both emerged together in the mid-1920s as respected ‘young lions’ among the Havana intelligentsia, did not immediately hear of his friend’s death, and the manner in which he eventually learned only added to the trauma of the loss. In a tribute to Lachatañeré that first appeared in the Venezuelan newspaper *El nacional*, Guillén recounted the shock of the news and his continuing struggle to come to terms with the situation. “It hit me with sudden impact, like a stone to the face,” he begins (Guillén 1975: 100). Not only had he failed to hear of the situation sooner, he explains, but the news surfaced so unexpectedly, in a casual and offhanded way:

> It was hardly even a parenthesis, an incident in the midst of banal chatter… ‘Do you remember Rómulo Lachatañeré?’ ‘Yes… He’s in New York.’ ‘No. He’s dead. He died with the plane that went down in Puerto Rico…’ That seemed to me improbable, as if planes do not go down every day and as if death were not ‘something that happens daily.’” (100; ellipses in original)

The news of Lachatañeré’s death “shook things up in the manner of a damaged wheel that has lost one of its spokes” and forces Guillén to reflect more broadly upon the nature of life and loss. *How do we confront the quotidian fact of death, the normalcy of pain?* Guillén wonders. He immediately acknowledges one possible, reflexive response: “I already know: there is ‘the marked day,’ as fatalists say. Destiny!” (100; emphasis in original). Guillén admits that “of course, [the idea of fate] is consoling because it searches for a way to help us accept the consummate fact, bowing our head before the inevitable.”

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95“Fue apenas un paréntesis, un incidente en medio de la charla banal… ‘Te acuerdas de Rómulo Lachatañeré?’ ‘Sí… Está en Nueva York.’ ‘No. Está muerto. Murió en el avión que se cayó en Puerto Rico…’ Aquello me pareció inverosímil, como si los aviones no se desplomaran todos los días y como si la muerte no fuera ‘algo que diariamente pasa.’”
If the underlying sarcasm in this characterization does not already give away Guillén’s distaste for the fatalism, then the next statement makes his sentiments clearer. “I reject [the idea of fate].” he immediately retorts, and he proceeds to deflate the fatalist presumption of inevitability. “Why complicate things,” he mocks, “by thinking about a supernatural force that pushed [Lachatañeré] toward the Caribbean and later made him board a doomed plane in order to leave him hanging over nothingness, stopping his heart?” (100).

With a quick summary, he dismisses such fatalist musings as ultimately unsatisfying and distracting: “In any case, it costs the same to think about destiny as to think about coincidence.” This conclusion reveals that, in the end, Guillén refuses any sort of passive stance that accepts life’s developments as beyond human agency, whether under divine control or driven by chance.

And by refusing to “bow his head before the inevitable,” even when confronted with the anguish and incomprehensibility of his friend’s death, Guillén implicitly calls up Marx’s observation about how people “make their own history” out of “circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.” From that point forward, Guillén’s memorialization of Lachatañeré became something more: an injunction to readers to social action, to transform their world. Guillén recognizes life’s felicitations and chance: “With all certainty, if Rómulo had stayed in New York he would not have died,” he concedes, and he offers that fact as all the more reason why history has to be ‘made.’ To reinforce the point, Guillén emphasizes Lachatañeré’s activist character. In life Rómulo continually tried to ‘make history,’ Guillén suggests, and the advancement of that project serves as the ultimate redemption of his untimely and confounding death.
But if Guillén uses Lachatañeré’s passing as an occasion to motivate his readers to ‘make history,’ what sort of action does he have in mind? What can be done? And with these questions, others immediately follow: In Marx’s formulation, what does ‘history’ mean in the first place? What concept of history allows for it to be ‘made’? For Marx, history is the canvas on which social life is documented, and therefore it unfolds—somewhat paradoxically—in multiple directions simultaneously, a continual present that perpetually looks backward and forward. In other words, history is the total record of life as well as the particular events that comprise that totality. In that regard, ‘history’ for Marx parallels but displaces *Kultur* as the primary sphere of human action. Marx famously figures history as unfinished; it is continually being made. The future remains open-ended and indeterminate, and the human task—as suggested in the famous citation from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*—is to transform history, to write a social record that reveals how humanity eventually managed to create a society in which all members are served justly.

And, for Marx, this ‘making’ of history pivots around the transformation of historiography. That is, the ability to shape the future stems, in part, from the power to represent the past. Accordingly, the image of history as canvas for the documentation of social life is an appropriate image: the historian acts as an artist who creates new visions of past events in order to bring specific images of the future to fruition, one who rewrites history in order to ‘make history.’ As a process of ‘making,’ history is fundamentally performative. Marx offers *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as an example of the artfulness, the performativity of historiography. The text is an historical intervention: it presents a distinct vision of Louis Bonaparte’s rise to power in an attempt to derail the trajectory of those crucial events in world history. And significantly, Marx’s study figures Bonaparte’s re-
emergence as a massive spectacle—a one-time “tragedy” that returns as “farce”—in which
the state orchestrates particular costumes, soliloquies, and movement of actors in order to
authenticate—and ultimately mystify—its true power.

Guillén, as a Marxist writer, consistently affirmed such Marxian notions about
historiography and history as intimately related artistic endeavors. Life, he often asserted, is
like a text: people can author their own destinies, using resources at hand to craft history and
its representation. Therefore, his invocation of Marx’s dictum about ‘making history’—first
signaled by his open rejection of fatalism—is a familiar move. His piece about Lachatañeré
tries to set Marx’s ideas in motion once again by presenting Lachatañeré’s personal history
from a particular angle.

As Marx does in the *Brumaire*, Guillén’s historical reconstruction mimics his subject
in essential ways by emphasizing the performative, history-making parameters of
Lachatañeré’s life and work. Guillén follows the summary dismissal of a fatalist view of his
friend’s death with a statement that opens up alternate possibilities for approaching the
disturbing turn of events. Rather than consider Lachatañeré’s death a matter of fate, Guillén
suggests, observers should focus on the theatricality of the situation and what it means.
Therefore, he continues his reflections on destiny by reducing the situation to one ‘dramatic’
fact: “the only certainty, that which is dramatically true and indisputable, is that the plane in
which Rómulo Lachatañeré was going from San Juan to New York went down . . .” (100;
elipsis in original).

Guillén finishes the statement with an ellipsis, as if to suggest that the matter of
destiny must be left for another time, and he promptly shifts focus and tone with a sweet
portrait of Lachatañeré, “that man of fine features and smooth voice” (100). However, by
placing emphasis on ‘dramatic truth,’ Guillén sets the stage for the rest of his discussion, which proceeds to emphasize the manner in which Lachatañeré developed artistic methods—and, more specifically, modes of historical drama—that illuminated fundamental, transforming ‘truths.’

4.

It is this commitment to the historical self-determination through ‘dramatic truth’ that Guillén underscores, in style as well as substance, in his eulogy of Lachatañeré. Guillén offers his initial descriptions of his friend in terms of his activism: “that Cuban dedicated himself to his people, serving them every day with his writing and with his life, with his art and with his science” (100). Guillén poses art and science, the traditional domains of drama and truth, not as antagonists but as cooperative handmaidens in the service of social progress.

As he continues, Guillén underscores how Lachatañeré’s commitment to his nation’s progress further undermines the fatalist perspective. He recounts the troubled history of Lachatañeré’s ancestors: his grandfather, a mulatto, descended from Haitian creoles who came to eastern Cuba at the end of the eighteenth century to escape the bloody slave revolts; he later died fighting against the Spanish for the cause of Cuban independence. The story of Lachatañeré’s grandfather, Guillén suggests, typifies the history of Cuba: he was another in a line of forced settlers, unexpectedly ending up on the island; “he was a cultivated mulatto, killed—like his grandson—in tragic circumstances battling for the liberty of Cuba” (101). Against the fatalists who want to view Lachatañeré and his grandfather as ‘marked by destiny,’ Guillén redeems the untimely passing of both men by highlighting their fight for Cuba’s freedom.
In the space of Guillén’s eulogy, the Lachatañeré's function in a manner similar to the serpent of “Sensemayá”: they die violently, but a ritual recovery through the act of textualization gives new life to the Cuban community. Guillén, as memorializer, takes an active role in inscribing the “dramatic truths” that might otherwise escape in the flow of “things that happen daily.” Guillén pulls the grand truth of the Lachatañerés’ lives out of the current of history in the same way that, at the beginning of the article, he was suddenly jerked from “the middle of banal conversation” by the news of his friend’s death. That flash of insight leads him to reject fatalism and embrace historical self-determination, and the eulogy itself serves as an immediate attempt to enact that principle. In order to redeem, Guillén also rescues: he snatches the events of Lachatañeré’s life and death from, at best, obscurity or, at worst, from the fatalistic impression of tragic inevitability.

But if it seems that Guillén, ever the poet, takes his powers of inscription too seriously, it turns out that he assumes his role as historical agent in deference to and imitation of Lachatañeré. Guillén proceeds to describe Lachatañeré’s ethnographic writings—the “art and science” with which he “serv[ed] his people everyday”—in almost epic terms. Guillén highlights how Lachatañeré adopted distinct and original ethnographic approaches in order to dramatize the historic truths embedded in Afro-Cuban traditions, which served as his primary subject. In explaining the significance of Lachatañeré’s books, Guillén calls attention to his friend’s paradoxical ethnographic style. On one hand, Lachatañeré’s texts emphasized and even mimicked the creative spirit of Afro-Cuban religious expression; on the other hand, the studies insisted on immediacy and lack of mediation in ethnography. Guillén explains that Lachatañeré’s first book, ¡Oh, mío Yemayá! [Oh, my Yemayá!], is a 1938 “collection of black stories and songs” that “are, in reality, brief narrations, loaded with fresh, primitive
poetry: fabulous tales through which move the most prestigious deities of African mythology, transplanted to Cuba in the slave-trader’s boat” (101-2).

Guillén discloses, “Rómulo did not very much like this book, published, according to him, with certain irresponsibility” (102). In hindsight, Lachatañeré considered the book, with its decontextualized dramatizations of the gods’ fanciful exploits, a misrepresentation of most Afro-Cuban traditions. “Nevertheless,” Guillén contends, the book “has more than one beautifully executed page and, although the style on others frays and threatens to unravel, [the text] is always sustained by the grace, the enchantment of the fable, the innocence of the yarn, stripped of all literary artifice, which stands out through its essential force” (102).

At first glance, Guillén’s description of the Afro-Cuban stories as they appear in ¡Oh, mío Yemayá! seems odd. The “fables” and “yarns” are full of “grace,” “enchantment,” and “innocence” because they are “stripped of all literary artifice.” The characterization sounds counterintuitive: fables and yarns, by definition, spiral around the tricks of storytelling. But, in the last instance, Guillén implies that the real test of this literature, the source of its ability to “enchant,” is not in deception but in the exposure of some “essence.” In this way, Guillén turns “literary artifice” on its head: to tell a tall tale in the right way, to spin a proper yarn might include flights of fancy but, ultimately, enchantment depends upon the use of artifice to supercede the artificial.

And, in describing the fables in such terms, Guillén actually means to convey the essential quality of Lachatañeré’s work. In calling attention to the “execution” and “style” of ¡Oh, mío Yemayá! Guillén reminds readers that, even as the stories derive from African mythology, they actually come from Lachatañeré. He is the storyteller here, not his informants. Guillén underscores Lachatañeré’s reworking of the original material by quoting
the opening “note of reference” from ¡Oh, mío Yemayá!: “The stories collected in this volume,” Lachatañeré explains, were “inspired by legends collected in the city of Havana” (101; emphasis added). Guillén’s explanation illuminates the critical dynamic between Lachatañeré’s ethnography and its subjects. The ethnography offers no pretense of direct transparency to a subject; rather, the text mimics fables. “Beautifully executed” ethnographic writing deliberately mediates between reader and subject, mobilizing any rhetorical trick that might help reveal the subject’s “essential force.”

In addressing Lachatañeré’s second book, Guillén reinforces this image of his friend’s texts as fabulously illuminating. But whereas ¡Oh, mío Yemayá! foregrounds Lachatañeré’s role as interpreter, “the Manual of Santería is something else” (102). According to Guillén, the book, published in 1942, is more effective, more enchanting than the 1939 study because Lachatañeré disappears from the text. He captures the essence of his subject not by emphasizing his own interpretive role but by retreating into the world of his informants. In Manual de santería “Lachatañeré proposes to examine the phenomena of religious syncretism in Cuba from new angles, in opposition to academic methods,” Guillén explains.

It is a valorous book as much for what it affirms as for what it negates; a book written from the bottom up, which is to say, beginning from his coexistence with practitioners, who he approached devoid of all intellectual or professional prejudice, so that it would be they themselves who talk and not their more or less wise, more or less erudite interpreters, who many times end up betraying [the informants]. (102)

Once again, Guillén’s description encapsulates Lachatañeré’s paradoxical approach. In direct contrast to the first book, Manual de santería aims for direct transparency. According to Guillén, Lachatañeré wants to eliminate unnecessary interpreters and to let the practitioners speak for themselves. However, this method does not necessarily contradict the purported objectives of ¡Oh, mío Yemayá! Guillén hints at Lachatañeré’s conception of his
ethnographic texts as activist, or affective, regardless of the apparent activity of the
ethnographer. It is not enough for Lachatañeré to leave Afro-Cuban practitioners alone;
circumstances require some sort of textual inscription. Lachatañeré may aim in his second
book to act as the medium through which his informants might express themselves rather
than as a privileged interpreter, yet Guillén underscores how Manual de santería also unfolds
as another sort of fable, full of rhetorical devices that produce certain enchanting effects. The
text’s success, its ingenuity and “valor,” arise from a literary construction—“written from the
bottom up”—that, unlike ¡Oh, mío Yemayá!, deflects attention away from itself.

Guillén’s characterization of Manual de santería identifies the immediate point of
contention behind Lachatañeré’s strategy. The ethnographer’s “convivencia”—coexistence—
with his subjects serves as a challenge to the “academic methods” of misguided
“interpreters,” full of “intellectual and professional prejudice,” who “end up betraying” the
populations they describe. But as Guillén points out earlier in the piece, Lachatañeré’s tactics
form part of his broader battle for “the liberty of Cuba.” In other words, his greater objective
was in giving force of expression to people who had been “betrayed” by “interpreters” armed
with the power of representation. Guillén’s key point is clear here: in helping to forge
alternate representations of Afro-Cuban traditions against false interpretations, Lachatañeré
also worked to transform negative images of Cuba in the world at-large. Both of his books
must be viewed in this light, Guillén insinuates.

Yet, of course, Guillén’s particular narrative about Lachatañeré does not tell the
whole story. While Guillén identifies the dramatic shift in style between ¡Oh, mío Yemayá!
and Manual de santería, he says nothing of the intervening period. When during the period
between 1938 and 1942 did the change in Lachatañeré’s methods occur? Did anything other
than Lachatañeré’s dissatisfaction with ¡Oh, mío Yemayá! precipitate the shift? How did he become disillusioned with the book in the first place? In the next chapter, I address precisely these concerns by focusing at length on a pivotal article by Lachatañeré from the intervening years. Guillén’s memorial usefully frames those considerations, on one hand, by providing an informed general introduction to Lachatañeré and his work and, on the other hand, by pointing—wittingly or not through silence—to new areas of investigation into those subjects.

One critical point of consideration surfaces immediately in some specific statements by Guillén that, while providing information, say nothing about an important development. He describes *Manual de santería* and explains how “Lachatañeré studies santería not only in Havana but also in Matanzas, Santiago de Cuba y Guantánamo, discriminating the Yoruba influence from Congolese influence” (102). However, one fact that Guillén does not mention is that it was Lachatañeré who first used the term ‘santería’ in the manner that Guillén himself employs. In describing *Manual de santería*, Guillén gives no indication that the book’s revolutionary title prefigures the text’s original content. The text is the first extended study to describe Afro-Cuban traditions as ‘santería.’ As Guillén indicates, the originality of Lachatañeré’s notion of *santería* stems from his circumscription of Yoruba practices.

Tellingly, Guillén describes his friend’s move as “discriminating,” a word and concept that surfaces prominently in Lachatañeré’s pivotal 1939 article. By drawing from Lachatañeré’s original vocabulary, Guillén implicitly signals the manner in which he also mimics the nature of his friend’s work as “discriminating” performance.

Still, Guillén’s eulogy serves as an even wider point of entry. It orients readers not only to Lachatañeré’s significant role in Afro-Cuban studies but also to the broad contours of that project as it includes and extends beyond Guillén’s friend. More precisely, the piece both
identifies and reproduces the defining twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse of performative interventionism, and Guillén situates Lachatañeré as a pivotal figure in the development of that discourse. Once again, Guillén’s portrayal of Lachatañeré takes its cue from the latter’s own texts. Just as Lachatañeré employed specific rhetorical strategies, inserting himself in or retreating from his ethnographies in trying to reproduce the “essential force” of his subject, so too does Guillén mimic his friend’s work by attempting to transform the sense of tragedy surrounding Lachatañeré’s life into a self-determining narrative of triumph.

But if Guillén tries to offer a portrait of Lachatañeré as a profane sort of hero, as an exemplar of a history-making man, certain pressing realities keep creeping back into the picture and threaten to invert the agency of Guillén’s portrayal of a heroic everyman. Despite his transformative action, Lachatañeré—like his grandfather—cannot escape circumstances that Guillén describes repeatedly as “tragic.” In other words, Guillén’s narrative ultimately equivocates around the question of what kind of history Lachatañeré, or anyone else, could conceivably ‘make.’ Can the force of action really trump the tragedy of an untimely loss of someone like Lachatañeré, or does history eventually get the better of us?

With its persistent equivocation on such issues, Guillén’s ostensible celebration of an active and artful life eventually pulls back toward Marx’s text of a century before. As a careful reader of Marx and a knowledgeable Marxist, Guillén knew full well that The Eighteenth Brumaire’s famous dictum about making history was not as simple as the familiar citation suggests. After all, Marx’s study portrays the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1848 as an apotheosis of counterrevolutionary state capitalism. In other words, the Brumaire shows that social agency can cut many ways. The history that men make is not necessarily
‘good,’ and it is precisely this indeterminacy of direction to which Marx hopes to call
attention. In the book, he delineates how the bourgeoisie seized control by shaping powerful
images “transmitted from the past”: Bonaparte’s new monarchy, Marx proves, gained
legitimacy by manipulating the imagery and rhetoric of the anti-monarchical Revolution of
1789. Yet, even if he admires the veiled genius of this episode of political transition and
presents it as an exemplary case of “making history,” Marx nevertheless abhors the
developments. He dissects the events in order to expose the unrecognized mechanics of
capitalism, to show how its ‘invisible hand’ actually works to strangle the masses to which it
offers the promise of material comfort. Marx constructs these images to inspire a socialist
inversion of, a truly revolutionary response to, Bonaparte’s Eighteenth Brumaire. For Marx,
ever the materialist, the key point—embodied in the famous observation about making
history—is to remind his readers of the defining paradox of social life: that so-called ‘free’
will is shaped by and never entirely liberated from its material determinants.

Guillén certainly understood Marx’s points about the negative potentialities of acting
on history and about the constricting force of material parameters on social agents. Guillén’s
full appreciation of these Marxian paradoxes surfaces evocatively in a single paragraph—an
epilogue of sorts—at the end of the eulogy for his dead friend. The implications in the text
illuminate Lachatañeré’s life and work as well as the production of ‘santería.’

The concluding paragraph of Guillén’s memorial to Lachatañeré reveals more than it
immediately says. The paragraph follows an extended space that separates it from the
preceding explanation of Lachatañeré’s work, and the formatting shift sets up a quick change
in focus and tone. Guillén returns from considerations of Lachatañeré as public citizen and pioneering ethnographer to a more intimate, concluding account of Rómulo’s outstanding qualities as a friend.

Here too Guillén hopes to reinforce the principle task of his article: the redemption of his friend as a powerful historical agent, even if in an unfamiliar register. Guillén implies that, despite his untimely death, Lachatañeré’s actions continue to strengthen the Cuban social fabric:

He was a firm, loyal friend. One of those friends whose deaths do not count as definitive and that live on at our side, not as the grand life of the heroic dead but rather in daily existence, full of small minutes, those small minutes of which centuries are made. This sort of life is one that does not know men called ‘important’ and that he lived amongst his people as in a great and pure river. (103)

However, the lines that precede this final stirring portrait of Lachatañeré evoke a somewhat different reality than a life “lived amongst his people as in a great and pure river.” Guillén, as he moves to this conclusion, reminisces about his last correspondences with his friend. He recalls the final time he saw Lachatañeré. It was in 1948 in New York, where Lachatañeré had been living for almost ten years.

In New York, we spent a pleasant and memorable day together, accompanied by Eusebia Cosme. We lunched in Harlem and I remember that there he helped me buy a pair of shoes, which I still have. ‘Some shoes for a fine negro,’ as he then told me with great delight. During those days he was completely immersed in his photography hobby, such that he got away with taking some shots of Eusebia and of me. That night I ate at his house, with his daughter and his lady, as in the verse of Zenea, another great tragic death.

The last sentence refers to Juan Clemente Zenea (1832-1871), a Cuban poet and anti-colonial revolutionary who died in Havana at age 39 at the hands of a government firing squad.

Guillén’s mention of Zenea accomplishes a number of different tasks. Notably, Guillén situates the episode with Lachatañeré in a poetic frame—the dinner happens as if in “verse”—and, in so doing, calls attention to the aesthetic parameters of his entire eulogy.
More immediately, Guillén parallels Lachatañeré with Zenea, who was an under-recognized martyr in the cause of Cuban liberty and who also sought political refuge in and organized revolutionary activities from New York. The offhanded reference to Zenea underscores the guiding thread of Guillén’s reminiscences: his friend was a hero—even if in a tragic vein—who undermines fatalism; in life (and death!) he gave meaning to human existence, with all of its incertitude and suffering, through action, by creating powerful works and by fighting for the cause of liberty. Zenea and Lachatañeré, like Lachatañeré’s grandfather before him, gave Cuba new life through their tragic deaths.

But once again, transformative action—whether by Lachatañeré, his grandfather, or Zenea—cannot fully shake free of immediate, even if tragic, realities. In the same paragraph, Guillén offers other telling disclosures. He underscores the force of circumstance. First, he describes that final dinner with Lachatañeré in 1948 as “a creole night, full of memories and evocations of the beloved and distant Island” (102-03). And with that revelation Guillén suddenly recalls the immediate parameters of that life “lived amongst his people”:

Lachatañeré spent a greater part of it from afar, with nostalgia and images as the primary conduit to the “great and pure river” of a Cuban pueblo that remained largely “distant” from Lachatañeré.

Guillén’s next recollection further hints at the depth of Lachatañeré’s nostalgia and his efforts to connect with Cuba: “I had already returned to Havana when I received one of [Rómulo’s] letters, asking for the latest recordings of Cuban music. I sent the [records] to him, but they arrived broken” (103). In this way, Guillén’s description of the “creole night” suggests the absence of and longing for an idealized “Island” as much as, if not more than, fulfillment and pleasure in Cuba itself.
Of course, there is a certain ‘tragic’ irony in Guillén’s concluding image of the broken records: the discs, like Lachatañeré himself, were shattered in transit from the Caribbean to New York. They suggest a broader sense of fracture in a Cuban community that, from its inception in the sixteenth century, consisted entirely of fragments of foreign populations. And almost immediately after its formation, that community of fragments began to fragment and to spread elsewhere. Lachatañeré’s desire for the records points to the displacement—and corresponding nostalgia—that frame his critical efforts. And, more pointedly, the records draw our attention to key characteristics of those contexts. Those slabs of cut vinyl, whose marks carry “the latest in Cuban music,” highlight systems of inscription on which all efforts to ‘make history’ depend. Whether or not they shatter en route, the records exemplify the manner in which ‘the Island’ and its constituent elements take shape as a series of inscribed and circulated images.

Thus, without intending to do so, Guillén reveals how Lachatañeré’s experience of Cuba while in self-imposed exile relies, as for so many others, on the aural and visual images etched in some form of media. Guillén’s own Marxian theoretics come back to haunt his portrayal of his friend. The trajectory of history is not as straight—much less, as easily controlled—as Guillén would like. In an apparent celebration of how “men make history,” Guillén’s tribute—with its invocations of heroic striving, peregrinations, airplanes with failed engines, and records that arrive broken—finally ends up dramatizing on ongoing series of displacements.

Ironically—or perhaps, most fittingly—Lachatañeré’s critical endeavors revolved around the notion that well-intentioned intellectual production often goes astray. In the next chapter, I examine work from the period of Lachatañeré’s professional life between
publications of his two books. During that pivotal time for Lachatañeré—1938 to 1942—he developed a biting critique in which he took, of all people, Fernando Ortiz to task for unleashing in 1906 an unwitting but dangerously potent magical spell in the form of an ethnographic characterization of Afro-Cuban traditions. And in trying to unsettle Ortiz’s creation, Lachatañeré came up with ‘*santería,*’ his own profoundly consequential trick that soon spiraled out of his control.
The continuous and exclusive use of this denomination has led us to recognize this original religion of Afro-Cubans under the name santería or ‘cultus of the saints.’

Rómulo Lachatañeré

1.

In the last chapter, I considered how a 1951 eulogy for Rómulo Lachatañeré reflected Nicolás Guillén’s decades-long association of magic with Marx’s insistence on self-determination, or “making history,” in the face of historically determined circumstances. In this next chapter, I want to reinforce a critical point running throughout my study: that Guillén’s engagement with Marxian thought was part of a wider circuit of discourse among Cuban intellectuals of the period and directly linked them to intellectual contemporaries elsewhere. Nowhere are the connections more apparent than in Guillén’s 1951 eulogy since Rómulo Lachatañeré stood as one of the poet’s closest intellectual allies. Like Guillén, Lachatañeré also remained committed to Marxist political projects throughout his adult life while simultaneously reflecting on the current limitations and future possibilities of Marxian criticism. Thus, Guillén’s eulogy also served as a way for one good Marxian critic to honor another. This chapter follows the trajectories of Guillén’s tribute to his friend to consider more fully the relations of Lachatañeré’s work to Marx and magic.
As eulogy, Guillén’s 1951 essay is necessarily retrospective, and his backward glance marks a crucial link between the development of Lachatañeré’s thought and the formation of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies around the beginning of 1937. In highlighting the importance of Lachatañeré’s scholarship, Guillén focuses on the development of his friend’s scholarly methods between the publication in 1938 of ¡Oh mío Yemayá!, the collection of Afro-Cuban inspired myths, and 1942’s Manual de santería, the ethnographic overview of an Afro-Cuban ritual system. This defining period of Lachatañeré’s intellectual production occurred in the years following the establishment of the SEAC. Just as Guillén was a Vice President of the Society at its inception, Lachatañeré was also one of the group’s founding members and an active participant in the organization from the beginning. His pioneering studies of Afro-Cuban history and culture developed within the context of the Society.

Accordingly, my discussion here revolves around an investigation into how the development of Lachatañeré’s critical perspective related to SEAC’s agenda, as articulated in the December 1936 “Advertencia” and in Ortiz’s January 1937 inaugural address. As I highlighted earlier, SEAC’s founding statement explicitly marked a shift in Cuban intellectual endeavors toward an emphasis on the revolutionary political potential of cultural production. In the opening of his inaugural address, Ortiz reinforced the idea that a reconfigured politics of culture required greater “documentary objectivity and serene analysis.” In the course of his discussion, Ortiz used critical analysis of Nicolás Guillén’s most famous verses to argue for a move away from the unfettered creative license of so-called ‘Afro-Cubanism—in which an artist incorporated ostensibly ‘African’ elements in any form he or she wished—toward more realistic portrayals of Afro-Cuban cultural forms. In the concluding passages of his speech, Ortiz insisted that the representations were necessarily
that: realistic *approximations*, or “aesthetic theatricalizations,” of inaccessible historical and cultural realities. Thus, Ortiz and the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies established “documentary objectivity”—or, as Alejo Carpentier would put it a decade later, “the chronicle of the marvelous American reality”—as the new model for politically effective Cuban intellectual production.

Nicolás Guillén’s description of Lachatañeré’s 1938 and 1942 books indicates the extent to which the texts tried to live up to the new, post-1936 “documentary” ideal. As Guillén describes, Lachatañeré offered *¡Oh, mío Yemayá!*—the 1938 work—as “a collection of black stories and songs.” Its most immediate purposes were documentary. With the book, Lachatañeré meant to anthologize “the fabulous tales through which move the most prestigious deities of African mythology, transplanted to Cuba in the slave-trader’s boat.” But, Guillén quickly adds, “Rómulo did not very much like this book, published, according to him, with certain irresponsibility.” Lachatañeré’s disappointment stemmed from his sense of failure to execute the chronicle properly. He recognized the “irresponsibility” as his own. He had altered the original material too much so that the sense of realism, according to Guillén, “frays and threatens to unravel.” Guillén underscores how in the 1942 book Lachatañeré rectified the perceived problem: “*Manual de santería* is something else.” It achieved the “documentary objectivity” that Ortiz had set in 1937 as a new standard and for which Lachatañeré subsequently strove. Lachatañeré’s 1942 text, Guillén summarizes, is “a valorous book […] written from the bottom up, […] devoid of all intellectual or professional prejudice, so that it would be [the practitioners] themselves who talk.”

But if Guillén’s characterization of the stylistically divergent texts identifies Lachatañeré’s common striving between 1938 and 1942 toward politically effective realism,
the 1951 tribute is also somewhat misleading. Guillén implies that his friend’s methodology took a quick, clean turn between 1938 and 1942. In fact, Lachatañeré’s change in methods was far less sudden. The shift developed over those years as a result of Lachatañeré’s involvement in—and, ultimately, his critical engagement with—the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies.

This chapter focuses especially on Lachatañeré’s work following the publication of ¡Oh, mío Yemayá!. That period—the latter part of 1938 through 1939 and into 1940—encompassed SEAC’s first years and, for Lachatañeré, included profound personal as well as intellectual changed. In his 1951 tribute on the occasion of Lachatañeré’s untimely passing, Guillén referred to his friend’s residence in New York. That change of location had taken place in 1939, when Lachatañeré moved himself and his family from Havana to upper Manhattan for personal and political reasons. Due to his active involvement in the Cuban Communist Party, Lachatañeré received clear signals during the late 1930s—the epoch of Batista’s increasing consolidation of political control—that the military and police had him under close watch. Since his university degree training and source of income involved medical research, Lachatañeré decided to take advantage of a job opportunity at Columbia University’s Presbyterian Hospital. The Communist Party also wanted him to lend his considerable skills as a political organizer to the New York chapter.

While juggling his professional and political commitments as he made the transition to a new country and different daily idioms, Lachatañeré continued to pursue his ethnographic pursuits. He arrived in New York with his recent, well-received book on his curriculum vitae as well as an enthusiastic recommendation letter from Fernando Ortiz, who frequently had visited New York both before and after his yearlong residence there during his
self-imposed exile from Cuba in the early 1930s. Ortiz, who later received an honorary degree from Columbia, had many well-placed friends at the university and elsewhere in North American universities, and he encouraged Lachatañeré to apply for admission to Columbia’s renowned Department of Anthropology. Lachatañeré followed Ortiz’s advice and submitted an application that, by all indications, was well received. He developed working relationships with Ruth Benedict, Melville Herskovits, and other prominent North American anthropologists.96

Even though Lachatañeré did not take up full-time anthropological studies after his move to New York, he did continue to work industriously on his follow-up to ¡Oh, mío Yemayá! However, the new book was not Manual de santería but rather another project that carried a working title of “El sistema religioso de los lucumís y otras influencias africanas en Cuba” [The Religious System of the Lucumís and Other African Influences in Cuba]. In 1938, while still in Cuba, Lachatañeré had started the project with the help of his friends in the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies; in 1941, after moving to New York, he sent four chapters of the book back to those colleagues in Havana. All four sections would eventually appear in Estudios afrocubanos [Afro-Cuban Studies], SEAC’s house journal.97

96Apparently, Columbia University admitted Lachatañeré to its anthropology program. However, I have not been able to ascertain why he did not join the department. I presume that financial constraints and his other commitments precluded the luxury of full-time graduate studies.

97As with many of the details of Lachatañeré’s activities during his first years in New York, accurate dating is a challenge. Lachatañeré worked on most of his “1939” series well into 1940 and probably into 1941. All four chapters appear in volumes of Estudios afrocubanos dated to 1939, but none of the issues actually appeared until 1941. The first chapter included a “Note” that explained that “the circumstances of the delayed publication of this volume, having already reached 1941, permits us to include the very important ethnographic study that our companion, Rómulo Lachatañeré, has submitted to us from New York” [la circunstancia de publicarse con retraso este número, ya entrado en el año 1941, nos permite incluir en él el muy importante estudio de etnografía que nos ha remitido desde New York nuestro compañero el Sr. Rómulo Lachatañeré] (Lachatañeré 1939a: 29). See Appendix B for the full translation of this “Editors’ Note.”
The articles from Lachatañeré’s years of geographic translocation reveal the corresponding methodological shift to which Guillén later called attention. However, the essays also show that the change in documentary methods did not occur as suddenly as Guillén suggests. The last of the published pieces especially exhibits a simultaneous continuity of and disjunction in the Cuban intellectual discourse of displacing magic, and it is that article that I examine in particular detail here. The piece, which Lachatañeré titled “Las creencias religiosas de los afrocubanos y la falsa aplicación del término ‘brujería’” [The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans and the False Application of the Term ‘Brujería’], immediately gained notoriety due to the fact that Lachatañeré questioned the current state of Afro-Cuban studies and openly criticized the pioneering scholarship of Fernando Ortiz, his own mentor and enthusiastic supporter. In pursuing that critical undertaking, Lachatañeré made another move that drew considerable attention: he coined the now-familiar use of the word ‘Santería.’

My argument here is that the various critiques in Lachatañeré’s article arose from an ongoing effort to articulate new critical perspectives aimed at unsettling the mystifications of social relations. As part of the contemporary discourse of Afro-Cuban studies, Lachatañeré’s project deliberately played off the figure of magic. Like Ortiz, Carpentier, and Guillén, Lachatañeré also cast magic as a species of practices arising from misguided notions of causality. He too identified such misperceptions of cause and effect among “primitives” as well as at the heart of modern capitalism, and he wanted to displace each of those magical forms. But also like those his three compatriots, Lachatañeré circumscribed an alternate practice—his own brand of displacing magic—as the means to sublimate the magic of
primitives and of capitalism. Lachatañeré sought to enact through that sublimation a measure of social transcendence.

In that regard, Lachatañeré’s project was thoroughly Marxian. It was a materialist reworking of Hegelian dialectics, and his critical objectives emerged forcefully in “Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans.” The article pivoted around suggestions—both direct and indirect—that magic’s unsettling power, its invigorating but dangerous potential, stemmed from the magician’s underlying drive to change material conditions by taking matters into his or her own hands. And according to those terms, Lachatañeré clearly wanted to present himself as another type of wonder-worker.

Lachatañeré’s magical aspirations surface most explicitly at the conclusion of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans,” so my discussion of the piece begins with analysis of that final portion. Curiously, Lachatañeré attempted to seal his materialist argument with the case of a ritual practice he referred to as “working a shadow.” He turned to the example to shore up the Marxian foundations of his discussion, arguing that the meaning of the act depended upon the unique socio-economic context in which the practice occurred. Lachatañeré described “working the shadow” as a form of African “magic” that changed into “mere superstition” after it moved through the slave trade into different material contexts in Cuba. However, Lachatañeré emphasized the common desire “to triumph in life” expressed in every version of the practice. In every case, “working the shadow” amounted to a practitioner’s demand to improve the material conditions of life.

Lachatañeré aligned his own motivations, including the objectives of the article, with that demand for just distribution of material resources. He cast himself as a kind of shadow worker. In that way, the concluding example in Lachatañeré’s “Religious Beliefs of Afro-
“Cubans” illuminates the critical dynamic of the entire article and, I want to suggest, of Lachatañeré’s intellectual engagements on the whole. I have used the verb “illuminates” deliberately in order to highlight the point: Lachatañeré figured his work in displacing magic in terms of tricks of light; he marked out what I call a politics of optics. Specifically, he wanted to make visible the social origins of seemingly natural forms that had come to structure social relations. In that sense, Lachatañeré pursued the familiar Marxist goal of ‘demystification’ of ‘reifications’ through ‘ideological unveiling.’ Like Marx, Lachatañeré viewed the commodity itself as a socially derived component that in contemporary life had assumed naturalized, transhistorical status.

But, for Lachatañeré, ‘ideological unveiling’ was not merely metaphorical. Rather, the sphere of images—including the literal manipulation of shadow and light—operated as a primary battleground in the struggle for social power. The production of images offered possibilities for oppressive as well as liberating forms of magic. Images shaped society, for better or for worse. Lachatañeré’s critique in his article of Ortiz and of Afro-Cuban studies—and his subsequent proposal of “santéría” as a part of a new descriptive vocabulary—can be understood from this perspective. In “Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans,” Lachatañeré tried to displace certain defining optical illusions with other, potentially liberating images. His concluding example made the idea explicit: he too was engaged in shadow-work, in a play of images, directed toward “triumph in life.”

2.

Working at almost exactly the same time as Lachatañeré, Walter Benjamin used the phrase “dialectical image” to describe what he considered the most urgent task of the critic in
the late 1930s. The production of “dialectical images” also fittingly describes Lachatañeré’s critical undertaking. I do not mean to conflate Benjamin and Lachatañeré’s efforts. Nevertheless, the mutually optical parameters of their work provides context that, in this case, can appropriately be called enlightening. In earlier chapters, I delineated some connections between Benjamin’s project and the Cuban discourse of displacing magic. As I explained, Alejo Carpentier’s work reveals direct points of geographic, historical, and critical contact: Carpentier and Benjamin moved through leftist intellectuals circles in Paris during the late 1920s and across the 1930s that led both men to critical engagements, through Surrealism, with Marxian theoretics. In Carpentier’s case, those experiences developed by 1949 into the insistence on “chronicles of the marvelous in the real,” a claim that came to define so-called ‘magical realism.’ The historical connections between Benjamin and Lachatañeré are not as direct as those between Benjamin and Carpentier. Still, the comparison of Benjamin and Lachatañeré’s critical endeavors around 1939 exposes the wider discourse circuit to which early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual activity belonged. Benjamin and Lachatañeré—each rethinking Marxian theoretics from their different geographic and critical positions at the time—tried to further Marxian theoretics by recovering the literality of Marx’s image of capitalism as phantasmagoria.

In the wake of Adorno’s criticism in the November 1938 letter discussed in Chapter One, Benjamin’s critical vocabulary turned more openly Marxian when it came time in 1939 to revise the 1935 exposé of his ongoing “Arcades Project” for a funding proposal that Adorno had steered his friend’s way. Marx’s well-known term, “phantasmagoria,” figured as a new keyword in the revised exposé. Marx had used the image to describe capitalism as a

98I refer readers back to my discussion of in Chapter 2 (section 1) of Benjamin’s notion of the “dialectical image.”
system based on illusion: it functioned through the circulation of commodities determined by a spectral “exchange value” that did not correlate with the labor that actually produced the good. 99 To a large extent, Benjamin’s appropriation of the term directly echoed Marx. After all, according to his exposés Benjamin hoped to demonstrate the illusions through which capitalism had taken hold. As he explained, Marx was absolutely right to refer to Paris as “the capital of the nineteenth century.” The city’s arcades revealed how that “capital” came to be through the desires produced by capital, and Benjamin presented his project as an attempt to link the display of commodities in the arcades to profound, corresponding shifts in social relations.

However, a number of files from the unpublished “Arcades Project” reveal that Benjamin wanted to go beyond Marx’s use of “phantasmagoria.” Or rather, he wanted to turn the word back on Marx. The history of phantasmagoria was as significant as the critical concept. The term actually derived from a form of entertainment invented in the mid-nineteenth century. --- had coined the word, literally meaning “ghost machine,” for the name of one his inventions. A series of paper cut-outs produced shifting shadows—“phantasms”—on a front wall when an operator revolved the shapes on a spindle in front of a light source projected from behind the machine. The ‘ghost-machine’ became a popular diversion throughout Europe. The phantasmagorias were especially popular in Paris, where they often played in a room off of one of the shopping arcades. Curiously, the simple shadow-makers routinely produced panic in their audiences. Even though the viewers always

99 Writing on June 28, 1848 in the Neue Rheinische Zeitung about events in Paris, Marx framed the French counter-revolution in the following terms: “Are we to conclude that the struggle for new forms of the State is devoid of meaning, is illusory -- a phantasm? Only weak, timid minds would ask this question. The conflicts arising from the very conditions of bourgeois society have to be fought to the end; they cannot be reasoned away. The best form of state is one in which the social contradictions are not overcome by force, in other words, only by artificial and specious means. The best form of state is one in which the contradictions collide in open struggle and thus attain a solution.” (As quoted in Riazanov 1973.)
knew the ‘trick,’ they frequently came to believe that the fanciful shapes embodied ‘real’ spirits.

Marx adopted the phantasmagoria as a fitting image for capitalism. He saw a parallel between the open but effective ruse of that popular attraction of his time and the mystification of exchange value under capitalism. As with commodities, people lost sight of the human origins of the ghost machine’s shadows and mistook them as ‘natural’ forces prior to social existence. Benjamin agreed that the phantasmagoria served as a fitting image for the inversion of social agency under capitalism, but the shadow-makers were also at the root of the nineteenth-century consolidation of capitalism embodied in Paris’s arcades. Thus, “phantasmagoria” was both historical artifact of and critical trope for the mystification of power under capitalism.

And, in that regard, Benjamin used phantasmagoria to expose what he considered a critical limitation of traditional Marxian theoretics: the underestimation of the power of images. Marxist criticism typically pointed to cultural production as a superstructural effect of material conditions. By that view, a society’s art—that is, the images it produced—did not of themselves determine material conditions. Benjamin disagreed. He considered images as profoundly affective, as a key force in shaping social relations. Marxian theoreticians had generally missed the full import of Marx’s image of the phantasmagoria. As an image of capitalism, the ghost machine—a simple but powerful image-maker—provided historical evidence of the power of images at the root of capitalism. Benjamin drew on Surrealist endeavors, as described in Chapter One, in developing a critical perspective centered on the idea of generating “dialectical images” that could unsettle capitalism’s mystifying representations.
This brief history of the phantasmagoria—and of Marx and Benjamin’s invocations of it—cuts back toward Lachatañeré. The presence of the ghost machine in Marxian discourse already hints at the critical dynamic that was at work when Lachatañeré turned to the example of “working the shadow” at the end of “Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans.” After that article, Lachatañeré’s interest in shadow-work would only become more pronounced and more central to his critical endeavors. Clear indications of Lachatañeré’s optical politics surface in the 1951 eulogy discussed in the last chapter: Near the end of his snapshot of his friend’s life and significance, Nicolás Guillén notes that in fact Lachatañeré beat him to it. Guillén describes what would turn out to be his last visit with Lachatañeré: a day in 1948 that the friends spent together in Harlem. Guillén offhandedly recalls that “during those days [Lachatañeré] was completely immersed in his photography hobby, such that he got away with taking some shots of Eusebia [Cosme] and of me.” The offhandedness of Guillén’s recollection masks the importance of the disclosure. He offers no additional commentary about Lachatañeré’s “hobby” or his furtive attempts on this particular occasion to capture his friends on film.

As it turned out, Lachatañeré’s death came about because he “was completely immersed in his photography hobby” at that time. In a prologue to the collected volume of Lachatañeré’s ethnographic writings, Isaac Barreal provides some crucial information that Guillén never mentions. Barreal notes that around 1945 Lachatañeré completed studies of commercial photography, which enabled him to acquire significant training as an ethnographic photographer. The mastery of this skill

109 Like Guillén’s tribute, Barreal’s 1992 prologue clearly portrays Lachatañeré in terms of his Marxist commitments. Barreal’s representation of Lachatañeré provides more rich ground for exploration of the ongoing ambivalence in twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse around the figure of Afro-Cuban magic. In another work-in-progress, I consider Barreal’s biographical essay from that standpoint. For the moment, I make use of Barreal’s prologue mainly as a source of biographical information about Lachatañeré.
was in his interest. Under these new conditions of work and with new possibilities of expression—and also taking advantage of some vacation at his job—he decided to travel to Puerto Rico, with the objective of collecting graphic material and information about the real situation of his brothers, the Boricuan people. He stayed for some time on that island, where he became interested in the situation that the jíbaro and the black suffered under North American colonialist oppression (Barreal 1992: xx). Barreal fleshes out Guillén’s description of Lachatañeré’s tragic death by providing more details about his return from that trip on April 11, 1951: “The plane in which he traveled, a four-engine DC4, […] would not fulfill its mission, producing the plunge to the sea (xx). Barreal immediately highlights the significance of the photographic pursuits that ended up costing Lachatañeré his life. “The Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions—an institution to which Lachatañeré belonged and of which he had organized the section dedicated to the photographic arts— […] exhibited ‘various photographs taken by him in Puerto Rico’” (xx-xxi). Barreal explains how “the leftist The Daily Compass, in previewing the exhibition and in evaluating the impact of [Lachatañeré’s] ‘life, his work, and his death,’ dedicated an entire page—it was a tabloid—and reproduced two of the photos taken by him on the colonized island” (xxi).

Barreal’s biography reveals that photography was not simply a “hobby”—as Guillén casts it—but rather a fundamental component of Lachatañeré’s life and work. He considered photography so essential to his endeavors as a leftist activist and ethnographer that he entered a program in professional photography and assumed organizational responsibility for the Council of Arts, Sciences and Professions’s Photography Section. In other words, Lachatañeré approached photography both as profession and as critical grounding. As The Daily Compass suggested in the tribute to which Barreal makes reference, by 1951

101 “Boricua” is a term for Puerto Rico and one of its natives, based on the name of island’s indigenous inhabitants at time of European conquest. “Jíbaro” is another colloquial reference to a native of the island. The translations of Barreal’s text are my own.
Lachatañeré’s “life, his work, and his death” revolved the production of dialectical images. For Lachatañeré, photography—literally ‘light-writing’—was a way to confront a phantasmagoria on its own terms, to turn the tricks of capitalism’s shadow-work at its own game, to displace reified figures with new, liberating images.

3.

Barreal emphasizes the Marxian dynamics of Lachatañeré’s photographic pursuits. Ostensibly, Lachatañeré “decided to travel to Puerto Rico with the objective of collecting graphic material and information on the real situation of his Boricuan comrades”; he wanted to document the ills that many Puerto Ricans “suffered under North American colonialist oppression.” Barreal implies that Lachatañeré intended to unsettle a balance of economic and political power by circulating “graphic material” related to “North American colonialist oppression” that had stripped fellow Caribbean peoples of control of their own material assets.

Barreal also hints that Lachatañeré was already in pursuit of optical interventions in the late 1930s. Writing in the early 1990s, Barreal identified Lachatañeré’s post-1938 project as a pivotal moment in Cuban scholarship. The Religious System of the Lucumís and Other African Influences in Cuba, he asserts, is one of the most relevant of ethno-historical character dedicated to the study of people of African origin in [Cuba…]. This work contains so many significant aspects for the study of the formation of our nationality and our culture […] before the proper beginning of the treatment of what the author denominates “the religious system of the Lucumís” or, as it would be, Santería. (xvii)

Despite the apparent significance of the project, Lachatañeré never finished it. In presenting the 1992 collection of Lachatañeré’s writings, Barreal admits that scholars could finally “offer [the project’s] continuation in the guise of some unedited material, and with such
finality submitted by his daughter, Diana Lachatañeré, in a gesture that the editors profoundly appreciate” (xvii).

Of the four chapters of the project eventually published by Estudio afrocubanos, the first three concentrate on historical factors in the formation of Cuban society in general and of Afro-Cuban communities in particular. In those sections, Lachatañeré hoped to show how the Lucumís, the predominant Afro-Cuban population in Cuba, derived not only from the Yoruba of western Africa but rather from a more complex process of “ethnic amalgamation” that began in Africa and accelerated quickly in Cuba. Lachatañeré’s key point is that the Lucumí are a distinctly Cuban group, forged over the course of the island’s peculiar history, and not a direct line of Yoruba in the Americas.

The fourth chapter builds on this argument but amounts to something quite different. It delineates a different history, or better yet, a metahistory. More specifically, Lachatañeré offers a genealogy of Afro-Cuban studies in order to assert that the historiographic propositions outlined in his first three sections generate new “base concepts” for the newly recognized field. Existing methods, he asserts, are fundamentally and dangerously misguided. Even the main terms for the study of Afro-Cuban history and culture are corrupt. To that point in time, the main area of consideration in the field had been Afro-Cuban ritual, and Lachatañeré takes immediate issue with the familiar term for these practices: ‘brujería’. Lachatañeré’s title for the chapter highlights the misnomer: “Las creencias

\[\text{\textsuperscript{102}}\text{The chapter titles read: “Nota histórica sobre los lucumí” [Historical Note on the Lucumí]; “Tipos étnicos que concurrieren en la amalgama cubana” [Ethnic Types That Merged in the Cuban Amalgamation]; and “Notas sobre la formación de la población afrocubana” [Notes on the Formation of the Afro-Cuban Population] (Lachatañeré 1939).}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{103}}\text{Brujería is often translated as ‘witchcraft.’ I generally leave the term untranslated since the expressed purpose of Lachatañeré’s article and of Fernando Ortiz’s response is the delineation of various, conflicting meanings of ‘brujería’. Still, as Lachatañeré shows, in all of its uses ‘brujeria’ refers to an illicit}\]
religiosas de los afrocubanos y la falsa aplicación del término ‘brujería’” [The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans and the False Application of the Term ‘Brujería’]. Thus, Lachatañeré’s chapter functions as a call for alternative vocabulary—beginning with the substitution of ‘santería’ for ‘brujería’—to suit Afro-Cuban studies’ new methodologies.

Lachatañeré’s provocative stance was a key element of his Marxian strategy. As Guillén attempted to do in his tribute twelve years later, Lachatañeré offers an alternate history in an attempt to enact social change. Like Guillén’s piece, Lachatañeré’s post-1938 project pursued Marx’s idea of ‘making history,’ but the articles pivot around the critical concept of dialectical materialism. Lachatañeré uses the principle as the filter through which to understand historical developments, most broadly, and the formation of Afro-Cuba, more specifically. Yet, like many other serious Marxist thinkers before and after him, he also probes the idea, searching for firmer epistemological ground on which to stake his materialist claims. After all, a precise definition of ‘dialectical materialism’—a term coined after Marx and Engel’s death by the Czech theoretician Karl Kautsky in the late 1880s and popularized after 1889 with the Second International—remains elusive even if the concept necessarily undergirds any Marxian theoretics.

Schematically rendered, dialectical materialism simply refers to the fundamental principle that life is situated in, or stems from, matter, which is always in motion; as independent entities constantly move, some come into contact and change each other in the process. 104 As a particular component of material existence, human reason follows this same

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104In *Dialectics of Nature* (1883), Engels explains the idea from which dialectical materialism unfolds: “Motion is the mode of existence of matter. Never anywhere has there been matter without motion, or motion without matter, nor can there be. Change of form of motion is always a process that takes place between at least
dialectical pattern: ideas unfold, circulate, and eventually bump up against different—and often contradictory— notions, producing the formation of new thoughts. Thus, Engels eventually refined the terms of his and Marx’s earlier discussions by characterizing “subjective dialectics (dialectical thought)” as a reflection of the “so-called objective dialectics, … the motion through opposites which asserts itself everywhere in nature.”

Marx’s agenda in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* serves as a reminder that for him, as for Engels and others, history acts as the sphere in which the dialectics of social life, itself a component of “nature,” ostensibly play out. Most immediately, “objective dialectics” can be discerned in past history and through dialectical thought—“subjective dialectics”—history-to-come can be dialectically enacted.

This understanding of dialectics frames all of Lachatañeré’s post-1938 pieces. In the initial chapters of *The Religious System of the Lucumi*, Lachatañeré illuminates the dialectics of history on one hand, while he operates dialectically, on the other. Thus, he begins each of the initial four articles by illuminating the economic frame—namely, European colonialism—in which cultural oppositions and, ultimately, syntheses or “amalgamations” took shape in Cuba. However, he also tries to unsettle that pattern of development by organizing his own discussion as a series of dialectical confrontations. The project comes to a head in the fourth chapter of the series as Lachatañeré brings his analysis of historical developments to bear forcefully on the main historiographic and methodological “concepts” of social science in general and of Afro-Cuban studies in particular.

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Engels continues the passage above with the following clarification: “Dialectics, so-called *objective* dialectics, prevails throughout nature, and so-called *subjective* dialectics (dialectical thought), is only the reflection of the motion through opposites which asserts itself everywhere in nature, and which by the continual conflict of the opposites and their final passage into one another, or into higher forms, determines the life of nature.”

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105
Lachatañeré’s discussion, his optical intervention, plays out as a critical genealogy. This tactic enables him literally to remake history by unmaking historiography, to produce his own forceful fictions by exposing the intellectual fabrications surrounding the contemporary study of Afro-Cuban life. Lachatañeré tracks the uses of the term ‘brujería’ in order to show how contemporary articulations perpetuate the social discrimination that produced the word in the first place. Thus, Lachatañeré depends on certain dialectical strategies aimed at unsettling established images of Afro-Cuban practice.  

4.

From the start, Lachatañeré situates “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” as an exercise in what Engels called “subjective dialectics.” His expressed purpose in the article is to confront his contemporaries for their role in shaping and perpetuating a popular image of Afro-Cuban traditions as conducive to criminal action. Lachatañeré presents his discussion as a direct response to the idea, which he later characterizes as a racially charged stereotype that has justified repressive treatment of Afro-Cubans. He sets the stage for his argument early in the essay by noting that “it seems that in our first quarter of the republican century, studies of anthropology pursued the Afro-Cuban type as good material by which to develop speculations in the field where this branch of science studies criminality” (197). Lachatañeré makes clear his opposition to the criminological focus of that “branch of science” by emphasizing its “failing in the election of appropriate methods for the discussion of other aspects of the life of the Afro-Cuban.”

106In this regard, Lachatañeré’s article is dialectical in the oldest sense of term. At its classical root, dialectics refers to a mode of logic based on confrontation and debate.
While Lachatañeré takes the majority of the essay to excavate the roots of common beliefs about Afro-Cuban criminal propensities, he does not in fact address the issue directly until late in his discussion. Only after more than two-thirds of his discussion does he finally reiterate the pivotal issue around which the entire essay supposedly turns. “The question to make clear,” he eventually summarizes, “is whether in Cuba the so-called criminal actions were committed because of brujería” (201), and the remainder of Lachatañeré’s article focuses directly on whether any viable connection exists between Afro-Cuban practices and criminal behavior. The deferral of the article’s central question provides the first glimpse of a rhetorical maneuver that he employs throughout the article.

Because of his postponement of the central issue, the concluding portion of article holds a key to understanding underlying Lachatañeré’s overall agenda. Structurally, the four articles in his original submission to Estudios afrocubanos rest upon this foundational portion of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans de los afrocubanos.” Lachatañeré does not disappoint. He uses the section to lay bare the theoretical suppositions that motivate his entire study. Lachatañeré begins the section by citing at length from some influential scholarship that provides cases that “seem to correspond to a ‘crime of brujería’” [parece corresponder a un “delito de brujería”] (202). That is, the studies “incline us to accept” [nos inclina a aceptar] that the crimes stem from “African brujería” itself. “But,” Lachatañeré quickly asserts, “those are criminal cases that should be catalogued outside of the study of religions. That the brujos would use such crimes to practice black magic is something very different from the idea that they carried out the crimes from religious impulses” (202-3) [Pero éstos son casos crímenes que deben catalogarse fuera del estudio de las religiones. Que los brujos usaran de tales crímenes para practicar la magia negra es cosa muy distinta a que los...
llevan a cabo con móviles religiosos). Lachatañeré concludes, “one has to accept as well that [any crimes committed] pertain to the study of criminal pathology” (203). Religious practices, African or otherwise, cannot be the root cause. “One has to understand that any individual, pertaining to whichever race, with criminal inclinations of such a nature, is a demented type, a general paralytic, as we say” (203).

In clarifying his point, Lachatañeré lays out a familiar Marxian frame of analysis. He rejects the possibility that criminality is religiously motivated and insists that criminal activity, like any social phenomenon, develops as an effect of a society’s underlying relations of economic power. In the last instance, a society’s “economic and social base” triggers what happens. From this traditional Marxian perspective, Lachatañeré explains how a “religious phenomenon” can shape individual “dispositions” but cannot function as a root cause of action. Ultimately, religion too is a superstructural consequence of that same economic and social structure:

Crime in West Africa—if we wish to observe it from a western point of view—was attenuated by the nature of the religious phenomenon, which by the manner in which they manifest or through the social conditions that envelop them, combine to create certain dispositions in the individual developing in an atmosphere where there are susceptible fears, whose causes have to be ferreted out not from the religious phenomenon themselves but rather from the same economic and social base on which these primitive societies rest (203).

107 “Ha de aceptarse también que éstos pertenecen al estudio de la Patología criminal.”

108 “Ha de entenderse que cualquier individuo, perteneciente a cualquier raza, con aficiones criminales de tal naturaleza, es un tipo demente, un paralítico general, digamos.”

109 “El delito en África Occidental—si lo queremos observar desde el punto de vista occidental—estaba atenuado por la naturaleza misma del fenómeno religioso, que por la forma de proyectarse en aquellas sociedades o por las consecuencias sociales que envuelve [SIC?], tiende a crear ciertas disposiciones en el individuo desenvolviéndose en un medio donde son susceptibles temores, cuyas causas han de escudriñarse [SIC] no en el fenómeno religioso en sí, sino en la misma base económica y social en que descansan estas sociedades primitivas.”
Lachatañeré’s defining point is that degrees of access to and control over material goods—not religious practices—structure a society and what happens within it: simply put, those people who cannot satisfy basic material needs—because they cannot produce and are not given necessary goods like food and clothing—are more prone to criminal behavior.

In focusing this Marxian lens of analysis, Lachatañeré tries to seal his argument with a concrete example of how distinct “social manifestations” arise from the specific “economic and social base” on which any society “rests.” Lachatañeré looks at a specific practice of “African brujería” that, by his opponents’ logic, would intrinsically inspire illicit behavior. He builds an extended comparison between that phenomenon and developments in Cuba in order to demonstrate more definitively how the same action plays out differently in each context. Since the effects of the ritual differ in each social situation, the practice itself cannot be a source of delinquency. The cause must lie elsewhere:

Thus, for example, when a ‘portafetiches’ of the Congo tries to seize the shadow of an enemy in order to ‘work it,’ as we say in Cuba, toward the death of the person, it is something that one can consider as an act produced by or with reason for existence in that atmosphere paid to return certain possibilities of efficacy to such spells. But upon passing into the New World, these social manifestations should not have had a long continuity nor produced themselves in the same form, but rather once put in a completely distinct—and to a certain point antagonistic—social frame they should have evolved in accordance with the new environment and lost all of the initial grade of efficacy so that they converted, many times, into mere superstitions; by luck that—in order for us not to depart from the aforementioned example—in Cuba the concept of the *shadow* as a spirit of vital importance for the individual has transformed itself into an inoffensive superstition, such that common folk believe that if a person ‘grabs the shadow of another’ it is like seizing their good dispositions in order to triumph in life. (203-04)\(^{110}\)

\(^{110}\) “Así, por ejemplo, cuando un ‘portafetiches’ del Congo trata de apoderarse de la sombra de un enemigo para *trabarla*, como decimos en Cuba, hasta lograr la muerte de éste, es cosa que debe estimarse como un acto producto o con razón de existencia en aquel ambiente abonado para brindar ciertas posibilidades de eficacia a tales encantamientos. Pero al pasar al Nuevo Mundo, estas manifestaciones sociales no debieron de tener una larga continuidad ni producirse en la misma forma, sino que puestas en un marco social completamente distinto y hasta cierta punto refractario, debieron de evolucionar de acuerdo con el nuevo medio.
This comparison of the different trajectories of the practice of ‘working a shadow’ seems like a fitting end to Lachatañeré’s discussion. The essay arrives at this convincing demonstration of how different socio-economic contexts transform a specific cultural practice. In the end, the different “concepts of the shadow as a spirit of vital importance to an individual” prove that each socio-economic “environment” [ambiente, mediý] determines “social manifestations.”

With this concluding example, Lachatañeré reinforces a traditional Marxist perspective by highlighting the evolutionary possibilities of historical development embedded in the trans-Atlantic “conversion” of shadow-work. His use of the verb “to evolve” is telling, of course. It situates the “transformation” of which Lachatañeré speaks within an evolutionary frame. In the following paragraph, he reinforces the point that the unsettling Congolese practice, with its stakes in death, “had to evolve” into “an inoffensive superstition” when transplanted to Cuba’s “completely distinct—and to a certain point antagonistic—social frame”:

Accordingly, many acts of enchantment carried out by the brujo in primitive societies, upon coming into contact with an environment socially distant from the one in which they originated—and do consider that slavery in the New World cut at the root the economic reasons for these phenomena—little by little the hexes lost their original efficacy. (204) 111

With this statement, Lachatañeré provides another familiar Marxist clarification: the “evolution” of which he speaks refers to socio-economic forms. His allusion to “primitive

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111“De suerte que para muchos actos de encantamiento realizados por el brujo en sociedades primitivas, al ponerse en contacto con un medio socialmente distanciado del que les dio origen—y estime que la esclavitud en el Nuevo Mundo cortó de raíz la razón económica de estos fenómenos— paulatinamente los maleficios perdieron su original eficacia.”
societies’ refers most directly to the complexity of their social organization and is not necessarily a judgment of their fundamental value. In fact, his reference to the severe impact of New World slavery serves as a reminder that complex ‘civilizations’ – the modern capitalist variety, in particular – hold no moral high ground on structurally “primitive societies.”

Lachatañeré rests his case at this point. With the example of how ‘working the shadow’ changes across contexts, he reiterates his main assertion: “In the last instance, and returning to the problem of Afro-Cubans, if one wishes to designate their cultuses under the denomination brujería, given their great amount of magical practices, then one would be moving far away from the essence of the problem.”112 That is, “magical practices”—categorized under the term “brujería”—are not the real origin of the “problem” of criminal activity among Afro-Cubans. According to Lachatañeré, to identify brujería as the final cause of delinquency is to miss the “essence of the problem” because magic is “an auxiliary category, structured in such cultuses as a consequence of their eminent realism, such that magic constitutes their economic base” [ésta toma una categoría auxiliadora, estructurada en tales cultos como consecuencia de eminente realismo de éstos, además que la magia constituye la base económica de ellos]. In other words, “magic” is an “auxiliary,” or superstructural, effect that only assumes structural force among Afro-Cubans in economic terms. That is, Afro-Cuban practitioners, with their “eminent realism,” know the truth about their “magic”: the practices ultimately spring from and gesture toward material realities, which is the “base” on which all social life “rests.”

112 En última instancia, y acercándonos al problema de los afrocubanos, si se quiere designar a sus cultos bajo la denominación brujería, dado su gran contenido de prácticas mágicas, esto significa alejarse mucho de la esencia del problema.”
In offering this distinction, Lachatañeré’s underlying appreciation for the disparaged practices, which is present throughout the section, comes to the forefront. By highlighting the “eminent realism” in Afro-Cuban “cultuses” regarding life’s material determinants, Lachatañeré challenges his readers to accept the same materialist principle. In this way, Lachatañeré’s crowning example throws a curious light on his entire project. If at first glance Lachatañeré seems to approach the practice of ‘working a shadow’ with ethnographic detachment, his parting allusion to the clear-sightedness of “magic” reveals that he does not keep as much distance from shadow-work as initially might appear. Thus, his explanations of African and Cuban variations of ‘working the shadow’ hint at the logic of the act within its context. Even the unsettling attempt of a Congolese ‘portafetiches’ to kill by taking the power of another’s shadow has a certain “reason” in “that environment.” Similarly, the Cuban folk practice of “‘grabbing the shadow of another’” makes sense in its place and even has a reasonable goal as a means “to triumph in life.” In both Africa and Cuba, Lachatañeré implies, ‘working a shadow’ is simply an attempt to achieve what everyone fundamentally desires: a sustained level of material comfort.

5.

The shadow-work example at the end of “Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” reveals that Lachatañeré works to build his own strain of dialectical materialism and that he does so dialectically. He rubs against the grain of familiar historiographic images in order to account for—and eventually redeem—the contradictions that have defined Cuba and Cubans. In the first sentences of the article, Lachatañeré alludes to the violence of European colonialism and of the slave trade that defined Cuban history and identity. Lachatañeré, like so many others,
tries to account for that conflicted history embodied in the spectrum of Cuban skin tones and in the multiplicity of Cuban cultural forms. He also wants to assure that the founding violence, which seems to him to endure, finds purpose and resolution. The figure of dialectics enables Lachatañeré to do so by highlighting the critical process itself as means to historical redemption.

Therefore, Lachatañeré begins "The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans and the False Application of the Term 'Brujería'" by highlighting the cultural encounters under European colonialism that continued to define Cuban society. Instead of focusing directly on dialectics, Lachatañeré first concentrates instead on what he calls “amalgamation.” The word denotes the fusion produced by the ongoing cultural encounters within the dialectics of history:

A product of amalgamation was the sedimentation, at the base of Cuba, of characteristics pertaining to the cultures of African people that made themselves known during the slave period; many elements of which have gone on structuring a Cuban cultural type that still is in its process of formation. (196)¹¹³

While the idea of the “sedimentation” of African cultural traits at the base of “a Cuban cultural type that is still in its process of formation” might seem curious, the geological image is clearly not accidental. Lachatañeré reinforces the point in the article’s second sentence, in which he notes that the formative clash of cultures actually predates the colonial period. “Amalgamation” among African tribes was well underway before European exploration, Lachatañeré explains, and the residue of that pre-colonial history endures among the contemporary Afro-Cuban population:

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¹¹³“Producto de la amalgama fue el desplazamiento en el suelo de Cuba de rasgos pertenecientes a las culturas de los pueblos africanos que se hicieron sentir durante el período esclavista; elementos de los cuales muchos se han ido estructurando en una cultura tipo cubano que aún está en su proceso de formación.”
Other [traits], through the force of their projections, have evolved, and continue to evolve, in the Afro-Cuban mass that expresses the essence of the amalgamation of African tribes.\textsuperscript{114}

With these initial observations, Lachatañeré immediately reinforces his main line of argument across the 1939 series. He reminds readers that Afro-Cuban culture, like “the Cuban cultural type” itself, has always been constantly “in its process of formation.” Neither Cuba nor Afro-Cuba is a direct transference of exogenous forms but rather a complex “product of amalgamation.” And to shatter completely the misconception that Afro-Cuban practices derive unadulterated from African Yoruba forms, Lachatañeré insists that the idea of ‘pure’ African cultures like the Yoruba is yet another myth. In calling attention to “the essence of the amalgamation of African tribes,” Lachatañeré trumpets the point that the African traditions brought to Cuba through the slave trade were always already hybrid.

In addition to reinforcing the key historical claim of the 1939 project, the opening paragraph of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” also set forth Lachatañeré’s ostensible task in the article: to excavate relations between “the cultures of African populations” and “pertinent traits” of the “Cuban cultural type” and of “the Afro-Cuban mass.” It is precisely this agenda that Nicolás Guillén would later describe, in his 1951 eulogy, as so innovative:

Lachatañeré studies Santería not only in Havana but also in Matanzas, Santiago de Cuba y Guantánamo, discriminating the Yoruba influence from Congo influence, the former characteristic of blacks of the capital, and of pure form, the latter, of those who live in the eastern section of our Island. (Guillén \textit{1951}: 102)

Fittingly, Guillén characterized Lachatañeré’s method as “discriminating.” The term calls attention to one of Lachatañeré’s primary tactics in “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans.” The article’s first sentences already exhibit his key strategy: the distinction, or

\textsuperscript{114}“Otros, por la fuerza de sus proyecciones, han evolucionado, y continúan evolucionando, en la masa afro-cubana que expresa la esencia de la amalgama de las tribus africanas.”
discrimination, of different cultural forms that reveal alternate, or ‘residual,’ histories. Visibility is at stake and, as Guillén suggested, the originality of Lachatañeré’s effort depended upon his ability to illuminate historical layers that other observers had not excavated. The opening paragraph of Lachatañeré’s article reveals the depth of his discriminating undertaking.

Nevertheless, Lachatañeré also admits that the task that he sets out for himself—the effort to distinguish between African, Cuban, and Afro-Cuban cultural influences—is ultimately impossible. After all, the paragraph builds toward an invocation of “the essence of the amalgamation of African tribes,” a phrase that serves as a reminder of cultures and cultural types constantly “evolving,” perpetually in “process of formation.” Despite Guillén’s claims that Lachatañeré delineated the “pure traits” [rasgos puros] of “Yoruba influence,” the opening paragraph of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” presents the Afro-Cuban culture as characteristically impure. Lachatañeré uses the term “rasgos”—the same term as Guillén—but suggests that the origins of Afro-Cuban “traits” are muddled as far back as historical perspective can see.

This insistence on Afro-Cuban cultural impurity creates as an apparent contradiction in Lachatañeré’s argument from the start. He works toward purifying distinctions while simultaneously asserting the impossibility of clarity with regard to the sources of Afro-Cuban cultural traits. The reader can only turn toward Lachatañeré for help, and that move appears to be precisely what Lachatañeré intends. He calls attention to the ways in which the historian—himself in this case—makes distinctions that are clearly fictitious. They result from freeze-framing history’s flow into set types, into snapshots of culture. With the first sentences of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans,” Lachatañeré already directs the
reader’s attention to the scholar’s role, to his role, as mediator and historical agent, as image-maker and magician.

6.

Lachatañeré’s opening paragraph establishes the critical dynamic that plays out across the entire article. The portrayal of historical dialectics ultimately points back to the historiographer’s intervention in history through the production of dialectical images. In the case of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans,” categorical reconfigurations, or ‘purified distinctions,’ function as Lachatañeré’s dialectical images. The article repeats the basic pattern again and again.

Accordingly, the second paragraph plays upon a distinction introduced in the opening lines of the article: the division between Cubans as a whole (“a Cuban cultural type”) and a particular sector of the population (“the Afro-Cuban mass”). Lachatañeré tightens the distinction and then almost immediately begins to collapse the two entities together:

To the first [set of characteristics, those of the Cuban cultural type,] pertain the strong African vestiges that we observe in the vernacular arts and in other lower and higher artistic forms, as well as other social manifestations that sleep in the ‘subconscious’ of Cuban society. To the second [set of characteristics, those of the Afro-Cuban mass,] pertains everything that contributes to the modulation of the character and vital manifestations of the Afro-Cuban nucleus of Cuba’s population. (196)¹¹⁵

This description reinforces the earlier point: that some general “African vestiges,” carried to Cuba through an Atlantic slave trade seeped into Cuban society at-large in the “vernacular

¹¹⁵“A los primeros [rasgos] pertenecen los fuertes vestigos negros que observamos en las artes vernáculas y en otras más depuradas y elevadas formas artísticas, además de otras manifestaciones sociales que duermen en la ‘subconciencia’ de la sociedad cubana. A los segundos pertenece todo lo que contribuye a la modelación del carácter y manifestaciones vitales del núcleo afrocubano de la población de Cuba.”
arts” and “other social manifestations” while “the Afro-Cuban nucleus” still contains the markings of a pre-colonial ethnic diversity.

Lachatañeré quickly identifies the locus of the “sedimentation” of African traits: Afro-Cuban “religion.” “Religion expresses one of the most exuberant forms of expression in the cultural mosaic of Afro-Cubans,” he explains, and therefore “it is to these Afro-Cuban religious beliefs that we will dedicate our attention in this part of our study.” However, in locating the residue of “the amalgamation of African tribes” in Afro-Cuban religious beliefs, Lachatañeré offers a significant qualification. He reveals that the traits related to pre-colonial African cultures actually have spread across the general public. Those traits now comprise part of the “the base of Cuban traits pertaining to African peoples that made themselves known during the slave period.” Thus, African religious beliefs remain as residue in the character of virtually every Cuban. As “one of the most exuberant forms of expression in the cultural mosaic of Afro-Cubans,” religion has reached a rate of expansion that has spilled out beyond the borders of the crucible in which were initially forged the elements that gave origin to the cultuses that give this amalgamation its tenor, expanding among a Cuban populace that easily absorbs the eminently realistic character of these beliefs.

In other words, Lachatañeré argues that religious beliefs served as the primary point of exchange among African ethnic groups brought to Cuba, giving rise to new Afro-Cuban ritual traditions. These “cultuses” exemplify the “amalgamation of African tribes” mentioned

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116 “[…] expresando la religión una de las mas exuberantes formas de expresión en el mosaico cultural de los afrocubanos. […] Y a éstas [creencias] es a las que dedicaremos nuestra atención en esta parte de nuestro trabajo.”

117 “[…] cuyo grado de expansión ha vaciado los bordes del crisol donde inicialmente se soldaron los elementos que dieron origen a los cultos que dan el grado de esta amalgama, expandiéndose entre el pueblo cubano que fácilmente absorbe el carácter eminentemente realista de estas creencias.”
in the article’s first paragraph. At the same time, those African-inflected forms of religious expression “spilled out” into and profoundly shaped “the Cuban populace” as a whole.

Lachatañeré’s curious description—sharpening a distinction between “Cuban” and “Afro-Cuban” that quickly bleeds together again—circumscribes the specific terrain where the intermingling takes place. Cuban society—including its “Afro-Cuban nucleus”—comes together in the common ground of realism. “The eminently realistic character of [Afro-Cuban religious] beliefs” apparently jives seamlessly with the outlook of the Cuban masses, who can “easily absorb” and integrate realistic but “exuberant forms of expression.”

Lachatañaré’s description points to his ending, in which he emphasizes how the practice of ‘working a shadow,’ in all of its guises, arises from the “eminent realism” about material needs that fuels magical endeavors. This direct bridge between the article’s beginning and its end hints that Lachatañeré, even from the start, already is ‘working a shadow.’

If a reader misses the trick, Lachatañaré makes his magic known in the next set of introductory paragraphs. Lachatañeré reinforces the dialectical pattern established in the article’s first sentences: he sets out different typologies and then almost immediately collapses them. In other words, he exposes his own intellectual constructs. The process leads him, at the end of his fourth paragraph, to openly synthetic distinction: ‘santería.’

He gets there by differentiating among African traditions brought to Cuba during the slave trade. Since his ostensible purpose is to explain something about Afro-Cuban religious beliefs, Lachatañeré emphasizes the diversity of African-influenced cultic practices in Cuba. As in the opening paragraphs, he relies upon a strategy of discrimination: “Here we will
discuss two groups of cultuses among those with which we are somewhat familiar: those of
the [African] Yoruba and Bantú types—or Lucumí and Mayombé, which are the
denominations used among Afro-Cubans for such cultuses” (196-7). With this distinction,
Lachatañeré correlates differences between Afro-Cuban cultuses with the diversity of
Africans forced into slavery in Cuba. Therefore, Afro-Cuban Lucumí cultuses appear to
derive from the Yoruba of Africa while Mayombé origins would lie with the Bantú. At a later
stage in his discussion, Lachatañeré’s particular distinctions between “the Lucumí type” and
“the Mayombé type” will resurface as critical. For the moment, Lachatañeré wants to remind
his readers of the starting point for his entire project on “The African Influences in Cuba”:
that not all “Afro-Cuban cultuses” are the same, just as crucial differences among the African
cultural sources.

At the same time, Lachatañeré emphasizes that clear demarcation of African tribal
practices is also a fallacy. Although “Yoruba” and “Bantú” are designations used to
distinguish Afro-Cuban cultuses, the terms are misleading. He gestures to the core points of
his other articles in his series on “The Religious System of the Lucumís and Other African
Influences in Cuba”: first, that Afro-Cuban practices were unique and not simply New World
versions of African traditions; second, as emphasized in the opening paragraphs, that the
ethnicities and practices of African tribes were always already amalgamated. Thus, notions of
“Yoruba” or “Bantu” purity were misleading and obfuscated the originality of Afro-Cuban
forms. For that reason, he points out that his interest lies in understanding “the essence of the
amalgamation of the African tribes.” With all of these layers of amalgamation, Afro-Cuban
practices emerge in “a system of cultuses that, one has to suppose, shuffled the African

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118 Aquí discutiremos dos grupos de cultos, con los cuales estamos algo familiarizados: los del tipo Yoruba o Lucumí y los del tipo Bantú o Mayombé, denominaciones dadas entre los afrocubanos a tales cultos.”
religions pertaining to those villages of Africa” from which the practices derived (196). With this point, the article’s third paragraph introduces more typologies—“Yoruba/Lucumí” and “Bantu/Mayombé”—that Lachatañeré simultaneously dissolves.

Lachatañeré does not fret about the transience of his distinctions. The tension between distinction and dissolution points to Lachatañeré’s main concern: “the essence of amalgamation.” Thus, he returns to religion, which he identifies as the pivot in the amalgamating process. Lachatañeré adds another element to his description of “religion” as “one of the most exuberant forms of expression in the cultural mosaic of Afro-Cubans.” The fact that elements of Afro-Cuban religion “have spilled out” beyond their original borders and “expanded among the Cuban pueblo” exposes “the primordial character of the beliefs of Afro-Cubans” (196). Here Lachatañeré repeats a phrase—“the character of the beliefs”—he also uses with regard to the “eminent realism” of Afro-Cuban ideas. The repetition provides another important bridge: the “religious beliefs” are “primordial” because of their “eminent realism.” They derive from a properly materialistic outlook and are directed toward “triumph in life,” which in discussing shadow-work traditions Lachatañeré underscores as primordial desire. In figuring “Afro-Cuban beliefs” as the embodiment of that desire, Lachatañeré locates a mechanism for understanding the multifaceted amalgamations that determined “the Cuban cultural type.”

Lachatañeré then turns to another religious amalgamation that parallels the “shuffling of] African religions” within the Afro-Cuban “system of cultuses.” In fact, his main assertion in the introduction is that “the primordial character of the beliefs of Afro-

119“[…] un sistema de cultos donde ha de suponerse se barajaron las religiones africanas pertenecientes a aquellos pueblos de África.”

120“[…] el carácter primordial de las creencias de los afrocubanos.”
Cubans […] allowed for interchanges with the Catholic religion” (196). Lachatañeré proceeds to outline the notable amalgamation—which he calls a “syncretism”—that resulted from these “interchanges”:

From the interchanges realized between Catholicism and the aforementioned African beliefs arose the syncretism between the saints of the Catholic pantheon and the deities of the respective African pantheons, creating in the exchange a new type of deity of well-differentiated characteristics that is known among the Afro-Cuban believers under the name of el santo [the saint]. From the current use of this word one derives another utilized to designate the fusion of the cultuses: the term santería. The continuous and exclusive use of this denomination [of deity as ‘santo’] has led us to recognize this original religion of Afro-Cubans under the name santería or culto a los santos [cultus to the saints]. (197; italics in original)

With the benefit of retrospect, we now know that this description of “the syncretism between the saints of the Catholic pantheon and the deities of the respective African pantheons” gave name and conceptual shape to contemporary Santeria. And in light of Santeria’s familiarity today, the clear artificiality of Lachatañeré’s last move is striking. In the short description, the dialectic between “Catholicism” and “African beliefs” leads Lachatañeré to the formulation of the synthetic term “santería.” In Lachatañeré’s characterization, “this original religion of Afro-Cubans” is a “syncretism” and, therefore, its name should reflect “the fusion of the cultuses.” Lachatañeré mimics the originality of a tradition in which practitioners develop the innovative vocabulary of ‘el santo’ in order to designate the creation of “a new type of deity.” He makes no secret of his fabrication of his use of “santería.” Lachatañeré emphasizes that “the continuous and exclusive use of [‘el santo’]” inspires his idea for “the name santería” but that the designation only “derives” from current usage.

Lachatañeré and most of his readers in the early 1940s knew that few, if any, practitioners actually used “santería” to identify their practices. Most Spanish speakers at the
time rightly would have presumed that practitioners would want to distance themselves from that term. It already had familiar connotations. For centuries, “santería” held colloquial meaning as a reference to the seemingly obsessive dedication by a Catholic individual to particular saints. Thus, “santería” was implicitly dismissive. The word identified someone who did not seem to understand the nature of ultimate power as conceptualized in either Catholic doctrine or secular scientific theory. Instead, the ‘santeròr ‘ santera’ dedicated unreasonable amounts of time and energy to the propitiation of saints who were, at worst, yet-another religious delusion and, at best, minor players in the cosmic drama. In other words, the term “santería” traditionally marked misguided ‘magic’ masquerading as Catholic devotion.

Was that Lachatañeré’s point: that the name “santería” would expose the true nature of Afro-Cuban practices as ‘magical,’ that is, as arising from mistaken convictions about personified “deities” who held power in and over human affairs? In his description, Lachatañeré already indicates that he intends “santería” to mean something quite different. He proposes the designation as a way to “recognize this original religion of Afro-Cubans.” In the core of the article, Lachatañeré explicates the critical implication in his characterization: that as “religion,” santería clearly differs from “magic.”

Accordingly, Lachatañeré’s summary of the “syncretism” between Catholicism and “African beliefs” and in his proposal to designate that “fusion of cultuses” as “santería” is an open trick. He does not invent the word; he tries to revalue it. And in working to invest familiar vocabulary with new meaning, Lachatañeré’s use of “santería” is an open trick. It is, as Fernando Ortiz subsequently underscored, a classic cubanismo. With it, Lachatañeré calls attention to his optical politics. He wants to force his readers to see something that they do
not yet recognize: the dangerous presumptions tied up in the common usage of ‘santería.’ He uses his own creative construction to expose familiar ideas about santería as social productions instead of as facets of timeless truth. For him, the word “santería”—as a familiar fiction, as his own artificial derivation, as an “original religion of Afro-Cubans”—embodies a range of social innovations. But, beneath all of the “amalgamation” and “syncretism” and “fusion” that surfaces in the opening of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans,” Lachatañeré already has gestured toward the “primordial” foundation that lies beneath all of “the interchanges” and that he will identify openly in the variations on ‘working a shadow’: the fundamental “desire to “triumph in life.”

8.

In order to move toward his final insistence about the unifying foundational drive “to triumph,” Lachatañeré returns to the critical point of divergence implied in his formulation of “santería”: the distinction between “religion” and “magic.” Lachatañeré considers more fully “the primordial character of the beliefs of Afro-Cubans.” In the opening paragraphs of the article, Lachatañeré suggests that the elemental nature stems from “African religions” of particular “villages of Africa” (196). This claim enables him to differentiate among African practices. The African religions of which he speaks “pertain to those villages of Africa” that possessed “elevated status and, at the same time, the high quality of such religious forms” (196). The “status” and “quality” of these particular “religious forms,” Lachatañeré clarifies, “allowed for interchanges with the Catholic religion.” This distinction paves the

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121 “[…] las religiones africanas pertenecientes a aquellos pueblos de África que, por su cifra elevada a la vez que la calidad de tales formas religiosas.”
way for his reference to “the Yoruba and Bantu types” as “two groups of cultuses among those with which we are somewhat familiar.”

The claims about the different “status” and “quality” of particular types of “African beliefs” structure Lachatañeré’s entire argument. The distinction sets up a comparison between “beliefs” according to the typology of “religion” versus “magic.” Lachatañeré reinforces this typology immediately after presenting his claim about “santería” designates an “original religion of Afro-Cubans.” With his next statement, he begins to demarcate “religion” by contrasting santería with another belief-type. He stresses that the recognition of “this original religion” enables a necessary “throwing out as incorrect the denomination brujería that until now has come to be applied to such beliefs” (197). Suddenly, the purpose of the article shifts radically. Lachatañeré no longer focuses on the direct explication of “santería” as an “original religion” but rather concerns himself with showing that Afro-Cuban traditions should not be called ‘brujería.’ The “religious” character of santería comes into view in Lachatañeré’s discussion indirectly: through the act of “throwing out the denomination brujería as incorrect.” Lachatañeré fairly represents this agenda in the title of the article: an image of “the religious beliefs of Afro-Cubans” takes shape by delineating “the false application of the term ‘brujería.’”

For Lachatañeré, the categorization of Afro-Cuban beliefs is much more than an academic exercise. His call for a forceful “throwing out” [desechando] conveys his sense of urgency in attempting to revalue Afro-Cuban traditions. His plea for the rejection of a “false application” indicates that he feels a great deal is at stake in establishing santería as an “original religion.” As Lachatañeré launches into an investigation of the trickiness of words,  

122 “[…] desechando, por incorrecta, la denominación brujería que hasta ahora se ha venido aplicando a tales creencias.”
his own language is appropriately tricky. At first glance, his call for the “throwing out as incorrect” suggests that “the denomination brujería” is entirely corrupt. However, other looks at the title and at the introductory paragraphs of the article indicate that for Lachatañeré the error stems not from the category but from particular uses of “brujería.” According to the title, the “term” is not necessarily “false” but rather the “application” of it to “the religious beliefs of Afro-Cubans.” Lachatañeré’s later statement corroborates the point: what must be “throw[n] out” apparently is not “the denomination brujería” as a whole but rather the fact that the term “until now has come to be applied to such beliefs.”

Accordingly, Lachatañeré focuses on questions of “application.” He sets his sights on the use of “the term ‘brujería’” as an intellectual act with profound consequences. Lachatañeré tries to intervene by literally rewriting coming terms. As word and concept, ‘santería’ embodies that effort. Lachatañeré recasts the words by which particular Afro-Cuban beliefs are known. He pursues that objective through a review of the history of Afro-Cuban studies. It is a dialectical maneuver, and Lachatañeré wastes no time in assessing the impact of particular academic categories of Cuban social life. He immediately points up the stakes tied up in the ethnographic study of Afro-Cubans since the field’s inception. Afro-Cuban studies, Lachatañeré reminds his readers, began as an offshoot of criminology: “It seems that in the first quarter-century of our republic anthropological studies set out on the path to taking the Afro-Cuban type as good experimental material for speculations in the field where this branch of science studies criminality” (197).\footnote{Parece ser que en nuestro primer cuarto de siglo republicano los estudios de antropología se encaminaron a tomar el tipo afrocubano como un buen material de ensayo para especulaciones en el campo donde esta rama de ciencia estudia la criminalidad.} In other words, the discipline
was founded on the principle that Afro-Cubans were prone to criminal behavior and that their activities needed to be studied in order to monitor and reform those dangerous tendencies.

Lachatañeré immediately skewers those initial assumptions as false and notes how they have misdirected “speculations” in the field ever since. Anthropological studies during the twenty-five years following independence in 1902, he summarizes, “fail[ed] in the selection of methods appropriate to discuss other aspects of Afro-Cuban life” (197). Lachatañeré does not follow up his accusation with direct explanation of which “methods” would be “appropriate” but only hints at alternatives by way of further critique. He proceeds with his historical review of the founding methodological and conceptual “failing” of Afro-Cuban studies. In a bold move, he singles out the initial “speculations” of Fernando Ortiz as pioneering but faulty:

Fernando Ortiz, who has the unquestionable merit of having discovered the existence of Afro-Cuban religious forms, pushed along this current in Cuban anthropological studies, leading to false execution in discussion of the material that he had carefully collected. (197)

With this statement, Lachatañeré locates a key methodological error: the materials on which Ortiz depended, even if “carefully collected,” were unreliable. He details the problems:

In this material, or catalogue of reports received from informants and imbued with the weight of fact, there was erroneous information, perhaps because the informants at times were very reserved and in other cases had bad intentions. Moreover, such material was compared with information proceeding from very particular African sources. Add to this the failure in the election of a method of

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124 “[…] fallándose en la elección de métodos apropiados para discutir otros aspectos de la vida del afrocubano.”

125 “Esta corriente en los estudios antropológicos cubanos arrastró al profesor Fernando Ortiz, quien tiene el mérito indiscutible de haber descubierto la existencia de las formas religiosas afrocubanos, al planteamiento falso de la discusión del material que cuidadosamente había colectado.”
discussion, and the true nature of the problem was necessarily obscured. (197) 

“But the first step was already taken,” Lachatañeré notes. On the next page, Lachatañeré summarizes the problem and offers a typical deferral of direct response: “Departing from this false interpretation of the foundational concept, our professor incurred other errors that we will revise further ahead” (198). For Lachatañeré, the bottom line is that Ortiz laid a shaky methodological and historiographic foundation for Afro-Cuban studies.

Nevertheless, Lachatañeré does not throw all the blame on his teacher. In fact, he asserts that Ortiz served as an intellectual missionary to Cuba of a theoretical doctrine that was not of his own design. Ortiz’s methodological imprecision, which enabled his loose “speculations” about “the Afro-Cuban type,” derived from flaws at the heart of turn-of-the-century European and North American social science. In this way, Lachatañeré is able to celebrate his mentor as an intellectual pioneer who is not ultimately responsible for the “errors” that flow from his “foundational concept.” Lachatañeré highlights Ortiz’s “merits [as] initiator of modern Afro-Cuban studies.” Ortiz, he adds, opened the doors to new investigations in this field—continued almost exclusively by him, such that Cuban scholars still look down on this class of studies or pursue it with reservations—and his work has shed much light on the discussion of the problem. (197) 

126. “En este material o catalogación de las informaciones recibidas de gentes enteradas, al parecer procedentes del lugar de los hechos, había datos erróneos, quizá porque los informantes unas veces fueron muy reservados, otras muy mal intencionados. Por otra parte, tal material fue comparado con datos procedentes de fuentes africanas muy exactas, y añadiendo a esto la falla en elección del método para la discusión, necesariamente se hubo de desvirtuar la real naturaleza del problema.”

127. “Partiendo de esta falsa interpretación del primer concepto, nuestro profesor incurre otros errores que revisaremos más adelante.”

128. “Fernando Ortiz abriría las puertas a nuevas investigaciones en este campo, las cuales, continuadas casi exclusivamente por él, ya que la gente de estudio en Cuba aún desprecia esta clase de estudios o los sigue con reservas, han proporcionado mucha luz en la discusión del problema.”

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However, despite Ortiz’s singular effort and influence, “the discussion of the Afro-Cuban problem” unfolded “in accordance with the concepts of contemporary social anthropology” (197).129

With this point, Lachatañeré situates Ortiz as an exemplar of a broader social scientific discourse that serves as the real focus of critique. His attack on the foundational “errors” of Ortiz—his mentor and a Cuban intellectual icon—is not personal but is, as Nicolás Guillén notes in 1951, an iconoclasm directed toward the hegemony of European and North American social science. Again, Lachatañeré perceives that Cuban social life hangs in the balance since “the concepts of contemporary social anthropology” shape Cuban identity at home and abroad. They function as “regulating concepts,” as he later calls them. They have powerful effects on the material lives of Cubans.

Accordingly, Lachatañeré does not let up on his critique. He continues to focus on the manner in which Ortiz instituted “regulating concepts” grounded in racial “prejudice.” He links the influential knowledge-production of “contemporary social science” to the specific words that he considers the embodiment of prejudice. Thus, Lachatañeré pinpoints the pivotal mistake of Ortiz’s groundbreaking 1906 book, *El hampa afrocubano: los negros brujos* [The Afro-Cuban Underworld: The Black Witch-Doctors]: its terminology. He notes, “in the discussion presented Fernando Ortiz employs the term *brujería* to designate the beliefs of Afro-Cubans; in that way Ortiz applies the term *brujo* to the priests of the cultuses”

129 In his published response to “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans,” Ortiz heartily agrees with Lachatañeré’s assessment that Afro-Cuban studies was founded “in accordance with the concepts of contemporary social anthropology.” In Chapter 5, I focus at length on Ortiz’s response and his description of his relationship to turn-of-the-century social science.
Lachatañeré presents the consequential problem with Ortiz’s vocabulary: “the use of this designation, […] in its basic purpose, is discriminatory” (198). The terminology carries negative connotations about the nature of Afro-Cubans, such that they have been subjected to social discrimination.

So how, specifically, is “the use of this designation, “in its basic purpose, discriminatory”? Again, Lachatañeré indicates that the issue boils down to the categorization of “beliefs.” When he points out that Ortiz “recognizes the term brujería to designate the beliefs of Afro-Cubans,” Lachatañeré implies that his teacher does not distinguish belief-types; he racializes the discourse by lumping together all “Afro-Cuban beliefs” as if their character derives from some quality intrinsic to their “Afro”-ness. As Lachatañeré previously stated, “speculations in the field” stem from the presumption that “Afro” peoples are prone to criminal behavior. It is that issue—“whether or not in Cuba so-called criminal actions were committed because of brujería”—that he takes up later in the article.

More immediately, Lachatañeré censures what he considers Ortiz’s imprecise distinction of words and concepts related to African traditions. Ortiz’s lack of linguistic discrimination, he implies, produces discrimination of another sort. As he continues, Lachatañeré even links Ortiz’s vocabulary to other “indiscriminately designated” but foundational terms:

Professor Ortiz departed, in accepting the application of this terminology, from the word fetiço [Eng. ‘fetish’], utilized by the Portuguese during the Age of Discovery to designate indiscriminately objects of adoration among Africans, and from which was derived the term fetichero to designate priests. Accordingly, [Ortiz] says: ‘In Cuba one without doubt calls the fetichero

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130. “En la discusión Fernando Ortiz se reconoce el término brujería para designar las creencias de los afrocubanos; así como se aplica el término del brujo a los sacerdotes de los cultos.”

131. “El uso de esta designación, la que, de primera intención, diremos que es discriminativa.”
‘brujo’ because, upon translating for the first time this word (whose root is Portuguese), it still had not been introduced into the vocabulary used in Cuba.’

(198)132

Lachatañeré follows up this historical excavation of Ortiz’s use of ‘brujo’ with an alternate genealogy of the term. In the second case, he explains how Afro-Cubans “apply [the] concept” of ‘brujo’. According to Lachatañeré, in African contexts the term has a technical meaning: it distinguishes particular types of “priests or priestesses […] who have a preference for the practice of black magic [magia negra].” Thus, Lachatañeré delineates some of the rich Afro-Cuban vocabulary regarding “clergy” of various types.

Afro-Cubans designate priests in accordance with the cultuses, at times, and in other cases utilize the priestly lineages derived from Africa. In that way, they call the priests of the Mayombe cultuses Mayomberos and for those of the Lucumi cultuses they utilize distinct priestly hierarchies derived from the Yoruba, such as babalawo, ialisha o yalocha, etc.; and they call those priests or priestesses—or, people outside of the clergy who have a preference for the practice of black magic—brujos or brujas, applying such a concept in the same manner that it is applied in African societies. (198)133

Lachatañeré’s point is clear: Ortiz’s use of ‘brujo’ is an obvious and gross colonial generalization while the Afro-Cuban “concept” accurately reflects the social complexity of African and Afro-Cuban communities; Ortiz “accept[s] the application of this terminology utilized by the Portuguese during the Age of Discovery to designate indiscriminately objects of adoration among Africans” and even admits that ‘brujo’ was simply an approximate

132“Parte el profesor Ortiz, para aceptar la aplicación de esta terminología, del vocablo fetiço, utilizado por los portugueses de la época de los descubrimientos para designar indiscriminadamente los objetos de adoración de los africanos, y del cual se derivó del término fetichero para designar los sacerdotes. Así, este autor dice: “Al fetichero se le llama en Cuba brujo sin duda porque al traducir por primera vez la palabra, que en el lenguaje africano significaba fetichero, aún esta última (cuya raíz es portuguesa) no había introducida en el vocabulario usado en Cuba.”

133“Los afrocubanos designan a los sacerdotes de acuerdo con los cultos, unas veces, y otras utilizando las líneas sacerdotales procedentes de África. Así, a los sacerdotes de los cultos mayombe los nombran mayomberos, y a los de los cultos lucumi los nombran utilizando distintas jerarquías sacerdotales procedentes de Yoruba, tales como babalawo, ialisha o yalocha, etc.; y les llaman brujos o brujas a aquellos sacerdotes o sacerdotisas, o gente fuera del sacerdocio, que tienen preferencia por las prácticas de magia negra, aplicando dicho concepto en la misma forma que éste se aplica en las sociedades africanas.”
substitute for that indiscriminate designation since *fetichero* “still had not been introduced into the vocabulary used in Cuba” at the time.

However, even if he is critical of a derogatory and generalized notion of ‘*brujo,*’ Lachatañeré highlights the lasting effects of Ortiz’s terminology. It quickly stuck, and it continued to circulate in scholarly and popular discourse alike. Lachatañeré holds Afro-Cubans themselves largely accountable for the situation. They too played a pivotal role in ensuring the continued viability of the “false application” of terms to their own traditions. He explains:

Later it is seen that Afro-Cubans did not think about those grammatical speculations rather than accepting that the terms *santero* or *santera*—as those that actually generically designate priests and priestesses, respectively—have been utilized in the wake of the studies of Fernando Ortiz. (198)¹³⁴ Lachatañeré’s delineation of the variety of Afro-Cuban terms for “the clergy” [*el sacerdocio*] reinforces the point, as he underscores the inconsistency of language: practitioners “accept” outsiders’ terms, employ words “in accordance with the cultuses, at times, and in other cases utilize the priestly lineages derived from Africa." Afro-Cubans, it seems, corroborate —through disinterest and tacit acceptance—the "grammatical speculations" with which they never have been concerned.

And by linking the array of Afro-Cuban terms for “priests and priestesses” to a genealogy of Ortiz’s “grammatical speculations,” Lachatañeré illuminates the trickiness of the subject at hand. He shows his readers, once again, that these distinct vocabularies also intertwine or eventually “amalgamate”: Ortiz exploits the “indiscriminate” terminology of the Portuguese colonial project in Africa while Afro-Cubans draw on the discriminating

¹³⁴“Más tarde se ha visto que los afrocubanos no pensaron en esas especulaciones gramaticales, sino que, aceptando que el término *santero* o *santera*, con los que actualmente se designan genéricamente a los sacerdotes y sacerdotisas, respectivamente, se hayan utilizado posteriormente a los estudios de Fernando Ortiz.”
technical vocabulary of those very African societies the Portuguese opened up to colonization; yet, these conflicting linguistic systems apparently congeal around the words ‘brujo,’ ‘bruja,’ and ‘brujería,’ which endure in Cuba’s vocabulary because of racial prejudice and because Afro-Cubans never thought to contest the terms openly.

Lachatañeré takes it upon himself to unsettle the terminology. In typical fashion, Lachatañeré plays another open trick. He raises no questions about the designations for African and Afro-Cuban “clergy.” However, he once again employs terms—“sacerdotes and sacerdotisas” (priests and priestesses)—that are he calls “generic” but that practitioners themselves do not necessarily use. In fact, “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” is full of transpositions of familiar Catholic terms to unfamiliar elements of “this original religion” that Lachatañeré has designated “santería.” He calls Afro-Cuban ceremonies “ritual and liturgy” [ritual y liturgia] (200); the followers of the “priests” are “acolytes” [acólitos] (201); and so on. Lachatañeré uses Church terminology to unsettle common ideas and practices.

The main purpose of his article, after all, is to challenge the “false application of the term brujería” and its attendant understandings of Afro-Cuban traditions. He points up these characterizations as “discriminatory” in order to argue that santería stands on its own as “an original religion” parallel and equal to Catholicism and other major “religions.”

9.

But if Lachatañeré’s genealogy of terms for “priests and priestesses” reinforces the image of santería as an “original religion,” his discussion of the terminology also serves another purpose. The distinction of vocabulary sets up Lachatañeré’s characterization of non-religious,” or “magical,” types. At the end of the passage on competing terminologies,
Lachatañeré explains that ‘brujo’ and ‘bruja’ refer, in the technical sense, to a specific kind of “clergy.” Afro-Cubans, he notes, sometimes “call those priests or priestesses—or, people outside of the clergy who have a preference for the practice of black magic—brujos or brujas, applying such a concept in the same manner that it is applied in African societies.” However, the appositive clause in Lachatañeré’s statement pushes directly against the point of the sentence. Lachatañeré affirms that brujos and brujas are “priests” and “priestesses” of a particular sort. However, the aside says that they are no such thing; brujos and brujas are, in fact, “people outside of the clergy.” Their “preference for the practice of black magic” seems to cut them out of “the priestly lineages” that Lachatañeré mentions.

In this way, Lachatañeré begins to flesh out a typology of two distinct social realities: “religion” and “black magic.” This distinction is profound because it leads to a key implication in Lachatañeré’s discussion: ‘brujería’ does actually exist. Its existence is all the more reason why the “false application of the term” to “religious beliefs” must be “throw[n] out as incorrect.” As the technical use of ‘brujería’ in Africa suggests, that word is simply another term for “black magic.” Through much of the article Lachatañeré uses “brujería” and “black magic” interchangeably in referring to non-“religious” types, and this tendency underscores his understanding that brujería is a social reality.

But what is brujería, or “black magic,” for Lachatañeré? What do brujos and brujas do that places them “outside of the clergy”? If “religious beliefs” do not naturally induce criminality, as Lachatañeré eventually argues, what about “practices of black magic”? Are they inherently “criminal”? In the remaining pages of the article leading up to the concluding section, Lachatañeré tries to sort out such questions about the differences between “religion”
and “brujería.” In doing so, he offers an answer to the last question that, at first flush, might sound surprising: In his estimation, “black magic” is implicitly criminal.

This ostensibly straightforward characterization depends upon the critical distinctions that Lachatañeré develops in the opening and closing sections of the article. As he asserts in the concluding paragraphs, criminal activities—“so-called delitos criminales”—arise from specific material conditions, that is, from the “economic and social base” of a society. In the first paragraphs, he highlights the diversity of and in African and Cuban communities that necessitates a discriminatingly “appropriate method for discussing” social difference. By extension, criminal activity should be accounted for through better approaches than the “speculations”—conceptual as well as grammatical—of the criminological anthropology on which Afro-Cuban studies had been based according to Lachatañeré.

His genealogies of terms and concepts intend to serve that purpose. Thus, Lachatañeré preserves the term “magic” as a way of signifying a certain type of materially determined activity considered “criminal” within its social context. He eventually makes that point through his concluding example of ‘working a shadow.’ In every case, it is a practice “that one can consider as an act produced by or with reason for existence in [its socio-economic] atmosphere,” and therefore its “efficacy” shifts as it changes social contexts (203). Lachatañeré supports that critical idea through an intervening discussion of “black magic” and brujería. His assertion is that practices as well as their categorizations are always relational; a social act—and the manner in which it is viewed—arises from its specific “environment.” Therefore, Lachatañeré considers brujería and the more general term “black magic” as legitimate designations for practice that members of a society consider “antisocial” or “criminal.”
Lachatañeré continues his genealogy of ‘brujería’ along those socio-historical lines. He reiterates his call to “throw out as incorrect the denomination” because ‘brujería’ derives from the dismissive outsider’s perspective of Portuguese colonizers:

As we said before, we are completely opposed to the utilization of the term brujería, not only to designate the beliefs of Afro-Cubans but also the manifestations of similar phenomena produced in other parts of the New World. (198-99)\textsuperscript{135}

To build his case against the application of ‘brujería’ to any African-influenced, New World system of “beliefs,” Lachatañeré expands his description of how the “concept [of the ‘brujo’] was applied in African societies.” He illuminates once again the cultural diversity of Africa but explains that a similar notion of ‘the brujo’ cut across all African communities:

In it original sense, this word—from the most rudimentary African society of the Bush Men or the Hottentots to the most advanced cultures of the Yoruba or the Bantu—is applied to determine an antisocial agent or disturbance. The brujo in any African society was always considered an unnatural whose criminal acts deserved complete repulsion. They were severely condemned with the penalty of death and precisely the same priests were charged with judging them.\textsuperscript{136}

With this explanation, Lachatañeré tries to expose Ortiz’s articulation of ‘brujo’—ostensibly based on a translation of fetichero—as “false.” Lachatañeré appeals to the “original sense” of ‘brujo’ and outlines the significance of native vocabulary. This history of the term reveals that every African society had a concept of “an antisocial or disturbing agent” defined in direct opposition to “priests” charged with judging outcasts. Lachatañeré’s genealogy of

\textsuperscript{135}“Como decíamos con anterioridad, nosotros estamos completamente opuestos a la utilización del término brujería, no solo para designar las creencias afrocubanas, sino las manifestaciones de esta naturaleza que se produzcan en otras partes del Nuevo Mundo.”

\textsuperscript{136}“En primer término, este vocablo, desde la más rudimentaria sociedad Africana de los bush men o los hotentotes hasta la muy adelantadas culturas de los yoruba o los bantú, es aplicado para determinar un agente antisocial o perturbador. El brujo en cualquier sociedad Africana fue siempre considerado como un desnaturalizado, cuyos actos criminales merecían toda repulsión. Eran severamente castigados con la pena de muerte, y precisamente los propios sacerdotes estaban encargados de juzgarlos.”

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‘brujería,’ as an alternative to Ortiz’s explanation, suggests that the “antisocial agent” is an inevitable social category.

As he proceeds, Lachatañeré underscores how the intrasocietal, relational sense of the term ‘brujería’ was lost in Ortiz’s translation, such that “African beliefs” as a whole are now marked as antisocial, unnatural, repulsive, and –in a word– criminal. He admits that, as “slaves transposed their beliefs intact to the New World,” “certainly” they “had to bring as well this concept of brujería as criminal” (199). However, the designation is now rotten beyond repair. “What happened,” Lachatañeré clarifies, “is that until a short time ago the study of the African survivals in the New World has been carried out with a distinct laziness and, at times, has applied to them racial and religious prejudices” (199).

To drive the home the point as well as to offer an example of some of the recent exceptions to these “racial and religious prejudices,” Lachatañeré cites some critical observations made by Alice Werner in her 1925 text, *The Mythology of All Races*, about the “faulty establishment” of scholarship on African “survivals” in the West Indies and United States South:

‘A mistake which has sometimes been made with regard to (the Obi and ‘Voodoo’ rites in the West Indies and the Southern States of America) is to treat them as normal manifestations of African religion, where as they represent not mere unauthorized but illicit practice. It should be remembered that most, if not all, of the slaves VOLUNTARY sold by their own tribes, in the days when the trade flourished, were either criminals, or debtors. Similarly, we find some writers even now confusing witches and witch-doctors as much as if one made no distinction between the thief and policeman.’

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137 “¿Por qué si los esclavos trasladaron íntegras sus creencias al Nuevo Mundo, no hubieron de traer también este concepto criminoso de la brujería? Ciertamente lo trajeron.”

138 “Lo que ocurre es que hasta hace muy poco tiempo el estudio de las supervivencias africanas en el Nuevo Mundo se ha llevado a cabo con cierta ligereza, y a veces aplicándose prejuicios raciales y religiosos.”
Lachatañeré insists that “Werner, in recognizing the confusion that has been made between witch and witch-doctor—a very appropriate phrase for sure—gives us the key to understanding the manner in which this same error was committed in Cuba” (199). In the same way, scholarship in Cuba has conflated “priests” and “brujos” in that same manner that, according to Werner, “we find some writers even now confusing witches [religious figures] and witch-doctors [illicit magicians]” when it comes to “manifestations of African religion.” Lachatañeré’s “key to understanding” entails the recognition that people who “represent not mere unauthorized but illicit practice” did actually exist in every African and African-American community but that these “witch-doctors” were already a distinct and reviled minority even before Western scholars like Ortiz lumped together all African-derived practices as illicit.

Despite his corroboration of Werner’s “very appropriate” observations, Lachatañeré does take issue with her claim that many slaves were sold into slavery by their own tribes because the “most, if not all, […] were either criminals, or debtors.” He turns to other contemporary scholarship, including the work of Melville Herskovits on Haiti, to underscore the diversity among Africans brought to the Americas. The Atlantic slave trade, Lachatañeré explains,

was a business sufficiently well organized so that the avarice of the native traffickers, stimulated at the same time by the greed of the European traffickers, poured into the barracks of the western coast of Africa not only criminals and those stripped of all social status but also people of all categories, from priests probably up to princes. (199)

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139“Alice Werner, al reconocer la confusión que se hace entre witch y witch-doctor, con una muy acertada frase por cierto, nos da la clave para entender de qué modo este error fue cometido en Cuba.”

140“[…] fue un comercio lo suficientemente bien organizado para que la codicia de los traficantes nativos, estimulados a su vez por la codicia de los traficantes europeos, vertiera en los barracones de la costa
This clarification enables Lachatañeré to build his argument for the legitimacy of santeña by (1) highlighting the clear separation between “religion” and “magic” in Africa and then (2) demonstrating that the bulk of Afro-Cuban tradition developed from legitimate “religions” and not, as typically conceived, from “black magic.”

Lachatañeré sharpens this point by insisting, in contrast to Werner’s characterization, that Afro-Cuban cultuses derived principally from the well-respected “clergy” and not from representatives of “illicit practice.” He makes this point in the strongest possible terms: “It is undeniable that in actuality the cultuses we find in Cuba were founded by elements with an intimate connection to the clergy of the African religions that contributed to [Afro-Cuban cultic] elaboration, if [those elements] were not in fact priests themselves” (199).¹⁴¹ To support this claim about the clerical roots of most Afro-Cuban traditions, Lachatañeré highlights the importance in the Cuban context of the Odus de Ifa, a collection of “high” Yoruba divination texts. He argues that the undiminished stature of the Odus de Ifa over many centuries demonstrates that non-magical, “religious” elements—a veritable religio-political “aristocracy”—held primary influence in Afro-Cuban communities from the very start. “At the very least,” Lachatañeré continues,

the presence of the Odus de Ifa, coming from the Yoruba cultures, in the practices of the Lucumí, of which we have been able to collect three different versions, signifies that these were introduced by genuine babalawos or high Yoruba priests, since their complicated mechanism and the knowledge required for their operation makes it impossible that they pass to the general population. Moreover, those that patiently studied the operation of the divinations were people of the aristocracy who utilized the acquired wisdom in pursuit of the aforementioned texts of Ifa as a political instrument enmeshed in the relations

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¹⁴¹ “Es indudable que los cultos que en la actualidad encontramos en Cuba fueron fundados por elementos en íntima conexión con el sacerdocio de las religiones africanas que concurrieron a su elaboración, si no fueron sus sacerdotes.”

occidental de África no solo criminales y gente desclasada, sino a personas de todas las categorías, desde sacerdotes hasta quizá príncipes.”
between the people and the State. People of this quality knew how to differentiate *brujería* from religion. (199-200)

Lachatañeré’s underlying assumptions surface unmistakably in this passage, punctuated clearly by the last sentence. Lachatañeré highlights the “quality” of the African “priests” as proof that the Afro-Cuban traditions that they established constitute sophisticated “religions” and, by extension, that the communities they led were respectable. At the same time, Lachatañeré fortifies the notion of “religion” itself as socially acceptable—versus the unsettling possibilities of *brujería*—by emphasizing the discriminating wisdom of “genuine babalawos or high Yoruba priests” who would not succumb to such “illicit practices.” Still, this point only reinforces the reality of “unauthorized” endeavors. Lachatañeré—like the wise priests to whom he calls attention—recognizes the existence of “black magic” in showing his readers “how to differentiate *brujería* from religion.” He also reminds his readers of the Marxian contours of his discussion of Afro-Cuban traditions: esoteric knowledge, like any form of scholarship, necessarily functions “as a political instrument enmeshed in the relations between the people and the State.”

10.

Lachatañeré’s whole project revolves around that nexus between knowledge and social power, and he continues to hone in on the link through an exploration of the mutual constitution of “magic” and “religion.” Accordingly, he investigates further the presence of “

\[142^a\] A lo menos, la presencia de los *Odus de Ifá*, procedentes de las culturas yoruba, en las prácticas de los *lucumi*, de los cuales hemos podido colectar tres versiones distintas, significa que éstos fueron introducidos por genuinos babalawos o máximos sacerdotes yoruba, ya que su complicado mecanismo y la sabiduría requerida para su manejo imposibilitaban que pasaran a la gente del pueblo. Además, que aquellos que pacientemente se aleccionaban en el manejo del oráculo eran gente de la aristocracia que utilizaban la sabiduría adquirida en el aprendizaje del mencionado oráculo de Ifá como un instrumento político engazado en las relaciones entre el pueblo y el Estado. Gente de esta calidad sabía diferenciar la *brujería* de la religion.”
brujería in Cuba and throughout the Americas. Again, his critical assumption is that 
brujería—and “magic” more generally—exist as social realities against which the properly 
“religious” ‘santería’ takes shape. “It is also undeniable,” he asserts, “that as much in Cuba 
as in other parts of the New World where there was slavery, brujos entered, perhaps in 
greater proportion than priests; and if the aforementioned priests exercised their profession, 
similarly would such brujos use their evil arts” (200).143 Lachatañeré continues: “If one 
accepts [that such brujos used their evil arts], one also has to accept that their practices were 
in antagonism with the religious practices.”144 But this description of the mutually 
constituting “antagonism” between “brujería” and “religion” allows Lachatañeré to emphasis 
once again the dialectics of history. The implicit opposition between the two social forms 
enables a synthesis and, ultimately, gestures for Lachatañeré toward a measure of 
redemption. “It is very possible,” he notes, “that these brujos, through the process of 
amalgamation, evolved toward the original cultuses that were born, such that it is no longer 
brujería but santería” (200).145 Lachatañeré turns back to the previously discussed 
“syncretism” of African religions and Catholicism as the model for what probably happened 
between socially acceptable and illicit practices:

If one recognizes that the religious practices of Afro-Cubans are mixtures of 
elements of Catholic ritual and liturgy due to the aforementioned interchange, 
why would not Afro-Cuban cultuses appropriate—as in reality has happened—
certain ethical and moral principles of Christianity? […]Similarly,] accept that

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143 “Es indudable también que tanto en Cuba como en las otras partes del Nuevo Mundo donde hubo 
esclavitud, entraron brujos, quizá en mayor proporción que sacerdotes; y si los sacerdotes mencionados 
ejercieron su profesión, justo es que tales brujos usaran de sus malas artes.”

144 “Si esto se acepta, también ha de aceptarse que sus prácticas estuvieron en antagonismo con las 
prácticas religiosas.”

145 “Es muy posible,” he notes, “que estos brujos en el proceso de la amalgama evolucionaran hacia 
los cultos originales que nacían, lo que ya no es brujería sino santería, en el caso específico que estamos 
estudiando.”
there could have been ‘alliances’ between brujos and sacerdotes [priests].

(200)¹⁴⁶

This observation brings Lachatañeré to the end of his argument for why ‘brujería,’ when applied to “the religious beliefs of Afro-Cuban,” is “false.” By Lachatañeré’s logic, ‘brujería’ does not fit as an umbrella term for Afro-Cuban cultuses because—in an amalgamation parallel to the “interchange” between the African and Catholic “religions”—brujos clearly would adopt “certain ethical and moral principles” that would pull the “witch-doctors” out of their sphere of “illicit practice.” “The ‘alliances’ between brujos and sacerdotes,” Lachatañeré summarizes, “could have endured up to the present moment, but they would not fall under the term brujería to designate the system of Afro-Cuban cultuses” (200; italics in original).¹⁴⁷ Technically speaking, ‘brujería’ simply cannot encompass the diversity of those cultic forms.

Nevertheless, palpable uncertainty surfaces in the paragraph in which Lachatañeré ostensibly seals his argument about the fallacious use of ‘brujería’ in reference to any and every Afro-Cuban tradition. In earlier paragraphs, he highlights that “illicit practice” is an inevitable social production determined by and determining the majority. However, his suggestion that “the process of amalgamation” could bring brujos—as social outcasts—into the “ethical and moral” fold points in another direction. Lachatañeré implies that marginalized populations actually can be integrated and that “criminal” is not only a relative concept. However, the syntax of the passage suggests that social integration remains more

¹⁴⁶ “Si se reconoce que las prácticas religiosas de los afrocubanos están colmadas de elementos del ritual y liturgia católicos a causa de los intercambios mencionados, ¿por qué los cultos afrocubanos no hubieron de apropiarse —como realmente lo han hecho— de ciertos principios éticos y morales del cristianismo? … Acéptese que pudo haber ‘alianzas’ entre brujos y sacerdotes.”

¹⁴⁷ “[…] ‘alianzas’ entre brujos y sacerdotes, las que puede que hayan perdurado hasta los momentos actuales, pero no se caiga en el término brujería para denominar el sistema de cultos afrocubanos.”

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hope than reality. Lachatañeré frames his observations, which are supposedly historical, in the subjunctive tense. The grammar makes clear that Lachatañeré’s historiography is uncertain and somewhat hypothetical. For instance, he signals his shift in focus from acknowledgement of brujería’s existence in Cuba with a less-than-definitive assertion that “it is very possible that these brujos […] evolved.” At one point in the paragraph, he limits his proposition to “the specific case that we are studying.”

Lachatañeré’s hesitation surfaces more noticeably in the Spanish constructions. He begins each of the two preceding paragraphs with the forceful keynote, “It is indubitable” [“es indudable”]. However, in this case he shifts registers to “es muy posible” [it is very possible], and the clause necessarily casts the following action—“that the brujos evolved”—into the subjunctive mode. Lachatañeré uses “evolucionaran,” the subjunctive form of the verb evolucionar, to signal uncertainty. Even his forceful imperative (“acéptese” [Accept that…]) is marked by doubt. He implores his reader to accept only that “there could have been ‘alliances.’” Therefore, he must once again operate subjunctively: These alliances “could have endured” [puede que hayan perdurado] and Afro-Cuban cultuses “would not fall under the term brujería” [no se caiga en el término brujería].

By casting brujería’s status in Cuba in uncertain terms, Lachatañeré fortifies other important dialectical movements—between history and possibility, fact and will—within his discourse. Throughout most of his discussion, Lachatañeré’s focus is historical. In this section, his perspective drifts into the conditional. The uncertainty marks a challenge; it function as a call to action. The sense of historical incompletion foreshadows the article’s final section, where Lachatañeré returns to magic from another direction in order to lay hold of the redemptive drive implicit in shadow-work.
More immediately, Lachatañeré shifts back to a more assertive tone. He strikes a note of conviction as he returns more directly to an exploration of the relation between knowledge-production and power. “It is certain,” he suddenly declares, “that in Cuba, among people alienated from the details of the Afro-Cuban problem, the term *brujería* is used in its occidental meaning” (200). With this transition, Lachatañeré adds another branch to his expanding genealogy of the concept of *brujería*. If Fernando Ortiz translated the unfamiliar Portuguese-rooted term ‘*fetichero*’ as ‘*brujo,*’ he apparently did so because the latter word had an “occidental meaning” that made it familiar to Cubans. According to Lachatañeré, that popular understanding colors the contemporary use of ‘*brujería,*’ overwhelming its technical connotations and rendering the term unusable. The “occidental meaning” of the term, Lachatañeré explains, is fed by religious prejudice, in the manner that everything that is not within the pompous magic of Catholic liturgy has to be considered heresy. The truth is that the regulating concept of *brujería* corresponds to that which was applied to medieval magicians and which was applied to the beliefs of Africans by the Capuchin monks that went to Christianize the Congo. (200-1) Lachatañeré then cites a long passage in order to “see if the assessment by the Capuchin Merolla da Sorrento about the *nganga* of the Congo is not the same that persists in official spheres of Cuba” (201). In the wake of the citation, Lachatañeré comes to the harsh conclusion that, indeed, the “sixteenth-century concept that missionaries to Congo had about

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148 “Es cierto que en Cuba, entre personas alejadas de los pormenores del problema afrocubana, se usa el término *brujería* en su acepción occidental.”

149 “[…] alimentada por prejuicios religiosos, de modo que todo lo que no esté bajo la pomposa magia de la liturgia católica ha de ser considerado como herejía […]. La verdad es que el concepto policiaco de la *brujería* está medido con el que se le aplicaba a los mágicos medievales, y que fue aplicado a las creencias de los africanos por los monjes capuchinos que fueron a cristianizar el Congo.”

150 “Veamos si la apreciación del capuchino Merolla de Sorento sobre los *nganga* del Congo no es la misma que perdura en las esferas oficiales de Cuba.”
the ‘rain-makers’ is practically the same as the one maintained by Cuban authorities to measure the ‘crime of brujería’” (201).\textsuperscript{151}

As he continues, Lachatañeré reaches the climax of his discussion. He emphasizes that the use of ‘brujería’—with its “occidental meaning, fed by religious prejudice”—is enormously consequential. Real lives are at stake:

Police round-ups are still actually organized to imprison priests and their acolytes in the places where santería ceremonies and rituals are celebrated. This simply signifies the disdain that the study of this aspect of Afro-Cuban life has caused, which is reflected in other forms of racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{152} Lachatañeré’s reference to the various “forms of racial discrimination” actually “caused” by Afro-Cuban studies clearly lays out his understanding of the social effects of academic discourse and the subsequent need for his revaluation of conceptual and grammatical “speculations.”

From this angle, Lachatañeré comes to the decisive moment that sets up the remainder of his discussion. His critical revaluations carry special urgency in light of the policing and other discriminatory practices that stem from the inherent “religious prejudice” embodied in the term brujería. It is here that Lachatañeré insists, “The question to make clear is whether in Cuba the so-called criminal actions were committed because of brujería, during the slave epoch or in the Republican period.” Lachatañeré pursues that task—“to make clear”—with his review of the scholarship on Afro-Cuban practices. And with that phrase, he

\textsuperscript{151}“Este concepto que tenían los misioneros que fueron al Congo en el siglo XVI sobre los rain-makers, prácticamente es el mismo mantenido por las autoridades cubanos para medir el ‘delito de brujería’.”

\textsuperscript{152}“Aún actualmente […] se organizan redadas policíacas donde se aprisiona a los sacerdotes y sus acólitos en los lugares en que se celebraran las ceremonias y rituales santeros. Esto simplemente significa el desprecio que se ha hecho del estudio de este aspecto de la vida afro-cubana, el cual se refleja en otras formas de discriminación racial.”
reminds his readers once again that his project is a matter of optics and of the power that comes with illumination.

11.

By working toward the middle of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” by first considering the article’s ending and beginning section, I have tried to show how various threads in the piece come together around Lachatañeré’s understanding of the nexus of knowledge and power. This last part of my analysis of the article addresses the core of Lachatañeré’s discussion, where he most clearly outlines the disturbing effects of Afro-Cuban studies. In the middle pages of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans,” Lachatañeré offers his most powerful evidence in his case for critical revaluation.

Lachatañeré reiterates his concerns, raised in the article’s opening, about the fundamental “concepts of contemporary social anthropology” (197). As Lachatañeré stated at the outset, Cuban “anthropological studies,” by using criminology as a point of departure, had “fail[ed] in the selection of appropriate methods” and, in turn, had “necessarily obscured the true nature” of Afro-Cuban social life. He addresses that “failure” by highlighting the diversity of cultic types among Afro-Cubans and their African forbearers and by demonstrating that the term ‘brujería’ inaccurately and prejudicially conflates these different cultuses as “antisocial agents.”

Having exposed some of the actual effects of “the false application of the term brujería,” Lachatañeré returns to the broader problem: the underlying critical failure of “contemporary social anthropology.” He contends that a lack of theoretical discrimination by social anthropologists causes the type of “racial discrimination” of which he just spoke. Most
importantly, the anthropologists have not properly distinguished “magic” from “religion.”
This conceptual limitation has “necessarily obscured the true nature of the problem” by
glossing over the interrelated facts that: (a) “magic” and “religion” are real and distinct social
phenomena; (b) the reality of and difference between magic and religion is determined by the
power relations within a society, such that “magic” represents practices considered “illicit” or
“antisocial.”

From this perspective, Lachatañeré thickens his genealogies of the term ‘brujería.’
The “antagonism” between magic and religion reappears as a matter of socio-economic
power. Lachatañeré turns his gaze squarely toward social anthropologist since they create
and use many of the terms of classification applied to Afro-Cuban traditions. He implies that
social anthropologists have bolstered—unwittingly or not—the structures of imperial
knowledge-production. His references to Portuguese explorers and Christian missionaries in
Africa accentuate the point: their capacity to “indiscriminately designate” a variety of
practices in terms of fetoço and brujería stemmed from and reinforced the imbalances of
economic, political, and social power within emerging colonial systems.

In that frame, Lachatañeré picks up his critique of Fernando Ortiz’s foundational
work as developed “in accordance with the concepts of contemporary social anthropology.”
As before, Lachatañeré takes his mentor to task for his dependence on unreliable secondary
sources: “Fernando Ortiz, not having completed personal research in this area, limited
himself to considering some cases mentioned in the press” (201). However, Ortiz’s greater
“failure in the selection of a method of discussion” (197) stems from his reiteration of the
racial and religious “prejudices” underlying those press accounts as well as his

153 “Fernando Ortiz, no habiendo realizado investigaciones personales en este campo, se limita a
considerar algunos mencionados en la prensa.”
criminological interpretation of them. Lachatañeré offers some significant examples from *Los negros brujos* (1906) of Ortiz’s misreading of case material due to racialist criminological presumptions. For instance, he cites at length a passage in which Ortiz attempts to support his argument about the criminal propensity of Afro-Cuban practice. Lachatañeré shows how Ortiz uses a “case taken from the press that seems to have clear evidence” of the criminal tendencies of African-inflected traditions: Ortiz explains how, during “‘the period of slavery, […] a brown-skinned sexagenarian” from Aguacate (Havana Province) supposedly abducted around forty black children “‘on whom their parents had just put clothes to take them for baptism’” (202). Lachatañeré notes that, in Ortiz’s mind, the criminal “inclination” of the “brown-skinned sexagenarian” in this and other cases “seems to correspond to a ‘crime of brujería.’”

Lachatañeré explodes that idea. He concedes that, because of the socio-economic circumstance of slavery, it is very possible that among slaves—and in the first days of the Republic just after the abolition of slavery—acts of this type were committed by the recently liberated servants, given that one knows that there were *brujos* and criminals scattered among such slaves, whose corrupted life had to continue for some time. This situation was attenuated in the sugar plantations, where isolation and oppression marginalized the black man who had no law in this land and who would continue his excesses in that terrible environment.

However, Lachatañeré does not let Ortiz—or the general “concepts of contemporary social anthropology”—off the hook. Ortiz’s inability—or rather, refusal—to recognize the material conditions that might explain criminal activity among slaves correlates to a lack of

154 “Es muy posible que entre los esclavos, y en los primeros días de la República, se cometieran, por los siervos recientemente libertados, actos de esta naturaleza; puesto que se sabe había brujos y criminales tarados entre dichos esclavos, cuya vida maleante debieron continuarla por algún tiempo, y más en las plantaciones azucareras donde el aislamiento y la opresión daban margen a que el hombre, que no tuvo ley en su tierra, continuara sus desafueros en aquel terrible ambiente.”
conceptual discrimination. “These are criminal cases that should be catalogued outside of the study of religions,” Lachatañeré contends.

That the *brujos* used such crimes to practice black magic is something very different from the idea that religious motives moved them to carry out the crimes. Accept this last idea, or misrecognize the Afro-American religious phenomenon, or reinforce an indistinguishable theoretical jumble regarding magic and religion. (202-03)

Presumably, Lachatañeré untangles that “indistinguishable theoretical jumble.” However, his use of “magic” and “religion” also appears confusing. “Magic,” “black magic,” and “*brujería*” sometimes seem interchangeable in his discussion; at other times, the terms have decidedly different connotations. Still, he casts all of these forms as necessarily defined by and against “religion.” In other words, “magic,” “*brujería*” and “black magic” indicate socially marginalized types of activity determined by a society’s relations of economic and political power. Accordingly, Lachatañeré sets up his discussion of shadow-work with a paragraph that illuminates “the social and economic base” that produces *brujería*. This “base.” Lachatañeré explains, structures the distinct but interdependent phenomena of “magic” and “religion”: “If one wishes to study the phenomenon of *brujería* in Cuba taking as the point of departure this phenomenon in West Africa, situating it as a religious issue, then one has to make a great distinction between both social factors.” That is, the African and Cuban contexts are unique and must be considered separately. In the case of Africa,

one has to keep in mind that as soon as religion approaches *brujería* it acts as an agent of repression because the religions in the majority of African societies, intimately connected with the repressive power of the State, pursued the ‘crime of *brujería*’ as a severely condemned antisocial element. And, moreover, obscuring in this process a purely economic motive, the priests in charge of the vigilance of these acts often abused their power, accusing an

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155。“ Pero éstos son casos críminos que deben catalogarse fuera del estudio de las religiones. Que los *brujos* usaran de tales crímenes para practicar la magia negra es cosa muy distinta a que los llevaran a cabo con móviles religiosos; y aceptar esto último o es desconocer el fenómeno religioso afroamericano o bien hacer una indistinguible mezcolanza entre magia y religión.”
enemy of such practices to dispossess them of their assets. Such abuse lowers the real percentage of cases of criminal inclination. (203)156

Thus, Lachatañeré’s explanation of brujería lands on “a purely economic motive” after all. He sticks closely to the Marxian script. He portrays “magic” and “religion” as realities determined in the struggle to accumulate political and, ultimately, economic power. His image of cat-and-mouse is evocative. “Religion” and “brujería,” it seems, define each other; they take shape only as one “approaches” the other. And the whole endeavor, according to Lachatañeré, is a clear play for political authority driven by desires for material gain. As “an agent of repression […] intimately connected to the repressive power of the State,” “religion” in African contexts circumscribes “brujería” as “antisocial” in order to “severely condemn” it. Thus, terms like “brujería” and “magic” serve as labels, as accusations, by which to take possession of the “assets” of others. In light of this characterization, is it any wonder that Lachatañeré—with his Marxist commitments to struggle for the liberation of the oppressed—considers magical practices as ways to fight back and to recover rightful “assets”?

In the last paragraph of the article, Lachatañeré reinforces this sense of struggle by offering a direct summary of his key point:

Having made the aforementioned clarifications, we now understand that the word brujería circumscribes a deficient concept, which loses its reason for existence as soon as we approach these cultuses with an appropriate method of study and accept without reservations the name that arises from the

156“Si se quiere estudiar el fenómeno de la brujería en Cuba tomándose como punto de partida este fenómeno en África Occidental, envolviéndola en el problema religioso, hay que hacer un gran distinción entre ambos factores sociales, y tener en cuenta que tan pronto la religión se acerca a la brujería es para actuar como un agente de represión, porque las religiones en la mayoría de las sociedades africanas, relacionadas íntimamente con el poder represivo del Estado, perseguían el delito de brujería como un elemento antisocial severamente condenado. Y aun más, ocultándose en esto una razón puramente económica, los sacerdotes encargados de la vigilancia de estos delitos, muchas veces abusaban de su poder para, acusando a un enemigo de tales prácticas, desposeerlo de sus bienes, lo que hacía que fuese menor el porcentaje real de los casos de esta índole.”
aforementioned cultuses, that is, the name *santería* or *cult of the saints*. 

But even here, in this neat encapsulation of his argument, Lachatañeré is still talking about relations of power. He describes an “approach” to the “false application of the term *brujería*” in a manner that mimics the mutually constituting encounter between religion and magic. Only in this case, he does not put the defining power in the hands of “priests” with dubious, self-interested motives. “*We now understand that the word* *brujería* *circumscribes a deficient concept*” and therefore must “approach” and defuse the crisis. With invocations of “*we,***” Lachatañeré places responsibility in his and his readers’ hands. With the right weapons of knowledge-production—most of all, “an appropriate method of study”—“*we*” come to his conclusion: “the name *santería*.” Fittingly, that *cubanismo*—by nature, an optical illusion—stands at the very end of Lachatañeré’s critical strivings.

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157.*Hechas las aclaraciones expuestas, entendemos que el vocablo *brujería* encierra un concepto deprimente, el cual pierde su razón de existencia tan pronto nos acercamos a estos cultos con un método apropiado de estudio, y aceptamos sin reservas el nombre que desprende de los ya mencionados cultos, o sea, el de la *santería o culto a los santos.*“
As schools of anthropology essentially do not distinguish religion from magic and one and the other continue to be pretty much mixed, it seems unacceptable today that both concepts are confused in such a way. And we have to make an effort to see that the term santería, which is a legitimate and well-formed cubanismo, be accepted to designate the religious systems of Afro-Cubans.

Fernando Ortiz

1.

When Rómulo Lachatañeré sent “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans and the False Application of the Term ’Brujería’” back to Havana after his translocation to New York, the article created an immediate stir. The editors of Estudios afrocubanos [Afro-Cuban Studies] reacted to the article with apparent surprise and anxiety. How should they handle Lachatañeré’s critique of contemporary social science in general and of Fernando Ortiz in particular? After all, Ortiz was largely responsible for the founding of Estudios afrocubanos and of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies. He remained one of Cuba’s preeminent intellectuals and the undisputed pioneer in the field of Afro-Cuban studies.

Given the obvious historical and theoretical value of Lachatañeré’s essay, the editors clearly wanted to publish it in Estudios afrocubanos. They decided they would do so and that they would ask Ortiz for a written response. The two pieces—Lachatañeré’s “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” and Ortiz’s rejoinder—were published together in one of the
Lachatañeré's essay was then introduced with a deferential editor's note:

This work appears with special tribute to Dr. Fernando Ortiz, founder and president of the Society of Afro-Cuban Studies, who initiated in 1906 this research in Cuba. Since Mr. Rómulo Lachatañeré treats the original work of Fernando Ortiz, Los Negros Brujos, we have asked its author for some notes in relation to the commentary of [Lachatañeré’s] present study, and he has put together for us some appended remarks that we will publish at the end of [Lachatañeré] study with the title ‘Brujos o santeros’ [Brujos or Santeros] (Editors’ note). (Ortiz 1939: 29)

The deferential tone of this prefatory note reveals the obvious discomfort that Lachatañeré's criticism of Ortiz created for the editors of Estudios Afro-cubanos. However, in his “appended remarks” Ortiz shows no signs of hostility toward his protégée’s seeming impertinence. On the contrary, Ortiz exhibits great enthusiasm for Lachatañeré’s argument. ‘The Master of Afro-Cuban Studies’ delivers a masterful performance in which he vigorously defends himself against the attack in order to reinforce the main components of Lachatañeré’s critique. Ortiz deflects the blame from himself and redirects it with even more force toward the main object of Lachatañeré’s attack: contemporary “schools of anthropology.”

With this deflection, Ortiz explicates an implicit part of Lachatañeré’s project. In referring to “schools of anthropology,” Ortiz makes clear that both he and Lachatañeré find fault with the degree to which Cuban intellectuals have relied on European and North American theoretical models that do not properly account for Latin American socio-historic realities. Ortiz suggests that, by virtue of the primary locations outside of Latin America of

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158 As mentioned in the last chapter, the 1939 volumes of Estudios Afro-cubanos did not actually appear until 1941. The journal’s editors explain that fact in publishing the four sections of El sistema religioso de los Lucumi y otras influencias africanas en Cuba, Lachatañeré’s work-in-progress at the time. (See Appendix B for the full translation of that “Editor’s Note.”) To reiterate, the chronology of Lachatañeré’s “1939” articles remains unclear. Similarly, the date of Ortiz’s “1939” response is uncertain, but he presumably wrote it in early 1941.
knowledge-production about the region, predominant scholarship lacks critical perspective and that Latin American intellectuals must take it upon themselves to rewrite—literally—the terms of social science. Cubans need to produce more cubanismos.

And that is precisely how Ortiz opens “Brujos or Santeros.” He celebrates Lachatañeré’s revaluation of ‘santería’ as a powerful cubanismo that especially unsettles leading ethnographic models of religious forms:

Lachatañeré’s thesis of not accepting the denomination of brujería to signify the religions of Afro-Cubans is really very laudable. As schools of anthropology do not distinguish essentially religion from magic and one and the other continue to be pretty much mixed, it seems unacceptable today that both concepts are confused in such a way. And we have to make an effort to see that the term santería, which is a legitimate and well-formed cubanismo, be accepted to designate the religious systems of Afro-Cubans. (Ortiz 1993a: 193; ¶1)

This wholehearted endorsement of Lachatañeré’s “legitimate and well-formed cubanismo” extends far beyond mere support for ‘santería’ as a technical designation. Rather, Ortiz already signals his intention to build on Lachatañeré’s broader argument about “regulating concepts.”

As discussed in the last chapter, Lachatañeré highlighted in “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” the potentially profound material effects of certain academic terminology. He singled out “the false application of the term ‘brujería’” from that standpoint. Lachatañeré constructed interlocking genealogies of the term to show that the contemporary use of ‘brujería,’ based on Ortiz’s institution of the word through his influential 1906 study, was not only technically imprecise but also dangerously effective. The conflation of all Afro-Cuban cultuses as brujería—and thus as a type of ‘magic’—had resulted in decades of

159 Citations refer, respectively, to the page number of the 1993 reprint of the article as well as to the paragraph number of my translation of the text (Appendix B).
discriminatory attitudes and actions against practitioners. Lachatañeré’s critical assertion was that *santería*, as a proper and “original religion”—did not fall within the category of “magic.” The misunderstood and much-maligned Lucumí traditions deserved respect instead of the mistreatment they continued to endure into the 1940s.

From the start, Ortiz indicates his fundamental agreement with Lachatañeré’s point about “regulating concepts” in general and “*brujería*” in particular. “Schools of anthropology do not distinguish essentially religion from magic,” Ortiz agrees, and he underscores Lachatañeré’s point that this conceptual confusion is “unacceptable.” Moreover, Lachatañeré was absolutely right that the entrenchment of *brujería* as an all-encompassing moniker for Afro-Cuban cultuses inaccurately and unfairly homogenizes a spectrum of ideas and practices. Thus, Ortiz immediately echoes Lachatañeré’s assertion that Lucumí traditions constitute a viable “religion”: “Lachatañeré's thesis of not accepting the denomination of *brujería* to signify the religions of Afro-Cubans is really very laudable”; “we have to make an effort to see that the term *santería*’ takes hold as a better designation for “the religious systems of Afro-Cubans.” Similarly, Ortiz’s emphasis on “the religions” and “religious systems” of Afro-Cubans reinforces another of Lachatañeré’s significant implications: that ‘magic’ and ‘magical systems’ exist among—but do not constitute the entirety of—Afro-Cuban cultuses.

“*Brujos or Santeros*” functions as Ortiz’s attempt to substantiate Lachatañeré’s contentions about the conceptual confusion embodied in and the social effects of the widespread use of the term “*brujería*.” In his response, Ortiz extends Lachatañeré’s critical genealogy of the term. Like Lachatañeré, Ortiz highlights the racial discrimination linked to processes of categorical discrimination since the Sixteenth Century. However, he insists that
such discrimination is not fundamentally racialist but rather a product of inevitable struggles for economic and political power. Thus, he extends Lachatañeré’s ideas about ‘religion’ and ‘magic’ as mutually constituting categories within particular social contexts in which the concepts operate.

In lengthening Lachatañeré’s genealogy of ‘brujería,’ Ortiz makes a familiar move: he first offers a personal account. As he did in the January 1937 lecture inaugurating SEAC and as he would do on the occasion of his honorary 1942 induction into Club Atenas, Ortiz provides a history of Afro-Cubans studies and of his role in establishing the field. However, in “Brujos or Santeros” Ortiz makes some unique and surprising disclosures about the development of Afro-Cuban studies. He divulges that the field emerged out of a dramatic performance that he delivered in 1901 to European colleagues during the completion of doctoral studies in Madrid. Ortiz provides this information in order to shore up the foundations of “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans.” For Ortiz, the episode proves one of Lachatañeré’s key points: that knowledge-production is a magical undertaking. The scholar creates material effects in the world when his or her “speculations” take root as accepted reality. Like Lachatañeré, Ortiz suggests that the naturalization—and denaturalization—of scholarly speculation occurs through the production of powerful images. In other words, Ortiz builds on Lachatañeré’s optical politics. He emphasizes the critical visual components that gave rise to Afro-Cuban studies.

2.

Since Ortiz’s objective is to clear up the confusion enveloping the categories of religion and magic, he agrees “some clarifications seem advisable” (193; ¶1). Lachatañeré
had figured him as a major source of the problem, so Ortiz moves to explain himself. “Above all,” he notes, the clarifications follow “from a personal point of view.” Ortiz launches into a biographical sketch that, he presumes, holds import for his readers too:

My book *Los negros brujos* [The Black Witch-Doctors] was published in 1906, having been composed by me between 1902 and 1905. Of these years, I spent three in Italy and only one in Havana, where I began my direct research. It is true that, like Dr. Nina Rodrigues had done shortly before in Brazil, I arrived at the ethnographic study of Cuba from the camp of criminal anthropology, with which I had my most fervent attachments. Perhaps some personal memories would not be inopportune.

In 1901 I finished in Madrid my university degree, which I had begun in 1895 in Havana, my natal city. During my stay of one year in Madrid and at the Sociological Institute organized by Sales y Ferré, we reviewed excitedly the recently published book, *La mala vida en Madrid* [Criminal Life in Madrid], by Constancio Bernardo de Quirós, the famous criminologist who subsequently, due to the silly vicissitudes of luck, had to leave Spain and can now be found as a professor nearby at the University of Santo Domingo [Dominican Republic]. I was then known in that group of young students for my criminological commitments. My doctoral dissertation, which earned from the Tribunal the singular vote of three highest commendations against two failures, had been on a positivist thesis, and for these reasons obliged me to comment there on Bernardo de Quirós's book and to distinguish its contents from *criminal life* [la mala vida (lit. 'the bad life')] in Havana. I felt worried because very little did I know of the tricky affair; but I acquitted myself gracefully by talking of something so exotic there as that which is published in Trujillo Monagas's work *Los criminales de Cuba* [The Criminals of Cuba] and that which I had seen in the Madrid museum, Ultramar, where some suits of *diablitos*, instruments, and the rest of the accessories were kept of the [Afro-

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160 Dr. Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, Brazilian forensic scientist credited with initiating the study of Afro-Brazilian culture. Ortiz frequently drew parallels between himself and Nina Rodrigues.

161 Manuel Sales y Ferré was a prominent Spanish scholar under whom Ortiz studied. See my discussion of Sales y Ferré and Spanish positivism in the introduction and in Chapter Two.

162 Constancio Bernardo de Quirós and José María Aguilaniedo, *La mala vida en Madrid* (Madrid: B. Rodríguez Serra, 1901).

Cuban] secret societies that had such theatrical fame during the colonial period.164 (193-94; ¶3-4; emphasis in original)

Ortiz’s revelations about his “tricky affair” were unsettling in various ways. He had gained his reputation as the embodiment of Afro-Cuban studies because of the stature of the same studies about which he reminisces in "Brujos or Santeros." Few admirers could have anticipated Ortiz’s admission that the famous and influential Los negros brujos grew out of a compulsion—or an obligation, as Ortiz frames it—to keep up appearances. Here he makes no secret that he tried to pass off his impressions—“very little did I know,” he concedes—as another “positivistic thesis” in order to sustain the authority of his “criminological commitments” for which he “was then known in that group of young students.”

Ortiz calls attention to the craftiness of his efforts. His Spanish cohorts, it seems, wanted nothing more than to believe fabrications he passed off about the perversions of certain inhabitants—criminals and blacks—in Spain’s former colony. “I acquitted myself gracefully,” he delights, “by talking of something so exotic there as that which is published in Trujillo Monagas’s The Criminals of Cuba and that which I had seen in the Madrid museum, Ultramar, where some suits of diablitos, instruments, and the rest of the accessories were kept of the secret societies that had such theatrical fame during the colonial period.” Ortiz does not dissociate himself from the exoticism that plagued his colleagues in Spain. He suggests that he drew inspiration for his own skillfully executed production from the histrionic excesses of Quirós’s criminological study and, especially, from the artifacts of the legendary ritual performances of colonial Afro-Cuban confraternities. And by framing the

164The diablitos were extravagantly costumed dancers who acted as sacristans within the rituals of Afro-Cuban secret societies. The dancers figured prominently in public celebrations as well, most notably the annual (January 6) “Day of Kings” comparsas discussed in section 2 of Chapter 4. Ortiz explains ‘diablito’ and related terms in the original Catauro de afronegrismos [Basket of Afro-Negrismos] (1924) and especially in the revised and expanded version, Nuevo catauro de cubanismos [New Basket of Cubanisms] (published posthumously in 1974).
founding moment of Afro-Cuban studies in such terms, Ortiz gleefully highlights the layers of theatricality in his 1901 show: his vivid portrayal of outrageous criminal actions draws on the Ultramar Museum’s exhibition, which depends on the costumes, drums, “and the rest of the accessories” of earlier performances, and so on.

As he continues, Ortiz begins to address this ‘and so on.’ He reaches farther back into the colonial epoch to identify other types of theatricality tied up in the casting of “magic.” This act is also multilayered, according to Ortiz. Most immediately, the process involves specific pursuits of “magicians” and their clients as well as the casting of those endeavors as “magic” by European observers. Building on Lachatañeré’s discussion, Ortiz portrays the act of characterization itself— the course of deeming something as “magic”— as a defining rhetorical gesture within a far-ranging social performance. Thus, he works toward his extension of Lachatañeré’s limited genealogy of the term *brujería*. Ortiz picks up on two key points in Lachatañeré’s genealogy of the term *brujería*: first, that the category of *brujería* has a technical meaning that refers to a specific type within a wide spectrum of “magic”; second, that despite such gradations of magical forms, the familiar understanding of the word *brujería* derives from colonial efforts to vilify all of those different practices by homogenizing them as non-“religious” and, thus, as heretical.

The first point arises from Ortiz’s divulgence of his fabrication of ideas about ‘*la mala vida*’ in Havana. Despite “acquit[ing him]self gracefully by talking of something so exotic,” Ortiz further concedes that he perpetrated the hoax largely because he did not want to appear ignorant. He felt bad about the ploy and resolved to rectify the situation, not by admitting his ignorance to his European colleagues but by overcoming it:

> In reality I knew nothing for sure of the ñáñigos, and from that point I proposed to myself to study them and to write a book that would be titled *La
mala vida en La Habana [Criminal Life in Havana] and to include a chapter on ñáñigüismo as one of its most conspicuous chapters. (194; ¶2)

With this admission, Ortiz introduces some new terms into the discussion: “ñáñigos” and “ñáñigüismo.” Very generally, ‘ñáñigo’ refers to the ritual leader within Afro-Cuban secret societies. The word derives from ‘ngangá,’ which European explorers in time came to understand as synonymous with ‘fetishes’—unique material objects with magical effect—as well as with an expert in making them. 165

Ortiz deliberately invokes the terms as a reminder of technical meanings: that ñáñigos are a unique type of ritual leader within a narrow body of African-derived traditions. In other words, Ortiz wants to corroborate Lachatañeré’s key point about how Afro-Cuban cultuses reflect the diversity of African heritage from which they borrow. He also means to defend himself from Lachatañeré’s charge that he had no sense of that diversity when he instituted the “false application of the term brujería.” Ortiz simultaneously agrees with and distances himself from Lachatañeré’s critique by explaining,

I had not even initiated the study of the ñáñigos when I came to understand that I would have to separate them from the brujos, as one commonly called them and calls them still. One and the other were confused, and both terms are still scrambled although they are expressive of very different things. And for that reason I continued to gather information for my study of the ñáñigos, and I dedicated myself to substantiating my initial findings about the brujos. (Forty years of labor already have now gone by.) (194; ¶5)

With the last part of the statement, Ortiz further limits his role in the continued fact that ‘ñáñigo’ and ‘bruyo’ “are still scrambled although they are expressive of very different things.” The task of clearing up the confusion has not been easy. The endeavor already occupied “forty years of [Ortiz’s] labor” without end in sight. On one hand, the research

165The long passage from Merolla da Sorenta cited by Lachatañeré in “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” includes a parenthetical reference to central African nganga (spelled, in this case, ‘ganga’): Sorenta recounts that “whilst I was in Bengo…my companion, father Francis da Monte Leone, seized upon one of the aforesaid wizards [los Gangas o Nzi]” (as cited in Lachatañeré 1939a: 201).
takes time; on the other hand, circumstances have conspired against Ortiz, limiting his ability to carry out the effort.

Ortiz explains these challenges in another passage. He admits some “error” on his part but largely absolves himself in light of the situation. He gladly cedes his ongoing project to any willing takers:

Upon my return to Cuba [in 1902], I thought that my criminological work would be a thing of a few months; but I soon realized my error. Havana had very peculiar issues in its *mala vida*, derived from its singular history and from the cultural conglomeration of white, black, and yellow peoples at its base. Facing these difficulties, which would demand a very long time, I joined with two good friends and distinguished writers of those years to write, among the three of us, the projected book. Miguel de Carrón, the fine novelist, was charged with studying the aspects of Havana prostitution, and the acerbic journalist Mario Muñoz Bustamante took charge of the examination of mendicancy. But the book about *La mala vida en La Habana*, with its attractive title and its alluring content, is still to be written. I offer the theme to any young and daring writing. Those companions died soon thereafter, and through another turn of fortune, I went for a stop in the land of César Lombroso and Enrico Ferri, with some information but without having written a line. (194; ¶4)

With his claim that even by 1901 he had come “to understand that I would have to separate [ñáñigos] from the *brujos*,” Ortiz feels he has defended himself from Lachatañeré’s charge of indiscriminate designation. He then proceeds to the address his protégée’s other criticism: that the term *brujería*, popularized during the epoch of European colonialism, homogenizes diverse but unorthodox forms of practice in order to denigrate them all as categorically heretical.

With this move, Ortiz lengthens the genealogy beyond his own experience in order to substantiate Lachatañeré’s implicit idea about the function of typologies as weapons in the struggle for social power. Specifically, Ortiz broadens Lachatañeré’s argument to show how

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166 See my commentaries in the introduction and in Chapter Two about the profound personal and scholarly influence on Ortiz of Lombroso and Ferri, the famed Italian criminologists.
“regulating concepts” that establish “orthodox” and “heterodox” forms cut across all societies. In his next sentence Ortiz clearly depicts how the surge for power generally plays out in arenas of faith:

In these kinds of religious affairs it is known that every priest believes himself repository of the only certain religion, of ‘the true truth,’ of the Truth with capital ‘T,’ and [considers] heterodox priesthoods wastebaskets of the worst ways, which to [the orthodox] are malicious, inspired by the spirits of evil, by demons, by the numens of enemy tribes, etcetera. (194; ¶6)

Building on this point, Ortiz delineates the basic structure of religious conflict as it developed in Cuba. He tracks the power struggle through a history of the discourse that took hold with the consolidation of Catholic power in Spain during the late fifteenth century. In a lengthy passage, Ortiz fleshes out Lachatañeré’s claims that “the regulating concept of brujería corresponds to that which was applied to medieval magicians and which was applied to the beliefs of Africans by the Capuchin monks that went to Christianize the Congo” and that “this concept […] is practically the same as the one maintained by Cuban authorities to measure the ‘crime of brujería.’”

Ortiz begins this part of his genealogy with the following observation: Because “every priest believes himself repository of the only certain religion,”

in the vernacular tongue of Cuba, the black who had any relation with the supernatural would commonly be called brujo, which was the term that was much in vogue in Spain and the Indies since the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, when in the Iberian peninsula there were more witches than those later counted in Afro-American groups. (194-95; ¶6)

With this point, Ortiz suggests that the religious struggles that played out in Africa and in Cuba have deep roots in the social dynamics of the Iberian Peninsula. Again, he offers this observation mainly to solidify the foundation of Lachatañeré’s project. As his student does in "The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans and the False Application of the Term ‘Brujería,’” Ortiz wants to demonstrate how typologies are not neutral; they arise from and reinforce
relations of power and can be contested or transvalued with “a legitimate and well-formed cubanismo” like ‘santería’. Therefore, Ortiz challenges Lachatañeré’s implication that, among Europeans, ‘brujería’ served as the general term for all unorthodox practices. Just because “the term that was much in vogue in Spain and the Indies” such that “the black who had any relation with the supernatural would commonly be called brujó,” the designations actually formed part of the Church’s larger technical vocabulary. In Ortiz’s view, the breadth of this typology of unorthodox forms only deepens Lachatañeré’s main point: the precision with which the Church defined its enemies proves how effective such “regulating concepts” really can be:

One only has to read the ecclesiastical writings of that period, the proceedings of the Inquisition, the treatises on moral theology, and the literary satires to see how full of brujería Spanish culture was with many of the essential attributes that one says are characteristic of Afro-American brujería, such as the magic, exorcisms, trances, possessions, ecstasies, spells, incantations, orations, amulets, charms, ‘evil eye,’ curses, psalmodies, and dances, up to the sporadic aberrations of cannibalism and necrophilia as well as with other fantastic or lubricious characteristics that never were known among Negroids, such as flights on brooms, nocturnal Witches’ Sabbaths, Satanic orgies, the freakishness of incubus and succubus creatures, and the prodigious rest in Catholic theory. As non-believers, such white brujerías were piously burned at the stake. Upon being transplanted to the lands of the Americas, the religion of the whites of Castile deemed those who did not take communion as: ‘infidels,’ if they had never been baptized (like the Indians, Moors, and Jews); ‘heretics’ or ‘apostates’ if, having become Christians, they renounced the papacy or accepted whichever other dogma (like the Protestants, Huguenots, Molinists, Jansenists, Illuminists, etc.); and, finally, ‘magicians,’ divided into brujos and hechiceros, if they had a direct treaty with the demons to create supernatural miracles against the mandates of the Church. (195; ¶7)

Ortiz continues the genealogy by explaining how the Church’s typology of the unorthodox entered and impacted American contexts:

Given the general ignorance of the matter, the term ‘brujería’ prevailed to signify the magic of blacks, and the word ‘hechicería’ for the magic of whites. Since then, thousands of poor devils accused as brujos died in the dungeons and the autos de fe of the Santo Oficio because, in 1484—a bit before the discovery of America—Pope Innocent VIII, with his bull Summis desiderantes
affectibus, fulminated on the most terrible canonical penalties and inquisitional persecutions against brujería. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries were precisely when all of Spain was at its fullest with brujos and with demons. Until a king died from a spell. Logically, then, when in the Antilles, before the Sixteenth Century ended, they began to discover certain mysterious rites among black slaves, with strange liturgies and exotic music, and with unintelligible sing-song, the same vocabulary was applied to them as was applied in Spain to those analogous rites persecuted by the Inquisition. (195; ¶7)

Ortiz lengthens his genealogy even further in order to advance his—and Lachatañeré’s—contention that categorization of belief reinforces relations of power. In the next paragraph, he links the Church’s strategies of denomination to developments within African and Afro-Cuban communities:

For the white Catholic, all of the black cultuses were brujería, an abominable thing inspired by demons for the ruin of human beings. In this expression was that same disdain that, in days gone by, was unanimous among the believers of one African cult against those of another. To the babalao, he who practiced mayombe or kimbisa was a brujo. It is curious to observe how still, among Catholic priests as well as among santeros, those who are not believers in their religion are typically classified as Jews, a word that in those centuries when it was seeping into the language of Cuba was one of the most abominable words in religious matters in every ambit of the Hispanic domain. (196-96; ¶8)

This set of observations rearticulates Lachatañeré’s idea that “in West Africa, […] as soon as religion approaches brujería it acts as an agent of repression because the religions in the majority of African societies, intimately connected with the repressive power of the State, pursued the ‘crime of brujería’ as a severely condemned antisocial element.” However, Ortiz’s rich genealogy recasts Lachatañeré’s example as a singular manifestation of an ostensibly transhistorical social phenomenon of “religious affairs [in which] every priest believes himself repository of the only certain religion, of 'the true truth,' of the Truth with capital 'T,' and [considers] heterodox priesthoods wastebaskets of the worst ways.”

In addition to universalizing the African social dynamics identified by Lachatañeré, Ortiz clarifies another issue raised in “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans and the False
Application of the Term 'Brujería'”. In summarizing a key issue, Lachatañeré insists at one point that “the study of the African survivals in the New World has been carried out with a distinct laziness and, at times, has applied to them racial and religious prejudices” (Lachatañeré 1939a: 199). Ortiz uses his genealogy of brujería to recalibrate Lachatañeré’s assessment. True, “the pejorative word continued—and continues—in common use,” Ortiz concedes. However, “it does not pertain to a racial prejudice but rather to one of originally ecclesiastical character.” He recognizes that “undoubtedly ethnophobias reinforce it and help to maintain it,” but racialism is a secondary consequence and not a primary cause (196; ¶8). For Ortiz, such distinctions are critical because they cast the fundamental issue more broadly as a matter of social conflict. In this frame, racial discrimination arises not as root source but only as an effect—albeit a prevalent and acute one—of the base struggle for control over material resources. Ortiz’s description places priests at the heart of that struggle for power. With his emphasis on the “originally ecclesiastical character” of discrimination embodied in the classification ‘brujería’, Ortiz reminds his readers that the clergy does not necessarily appear on the side of righteousness in the contest over resources and power.

3.

Ortiz builds on his preceding commentary to distance himself further from the perpetuation of the brujería-concept. He does so by appealing to material determinants that structure the social power plays he just outlined. First, he notes that his genealogy of brujería undercuts Lachatañeré’s accusation against him. Ortiz asserts that, in fact, he used the designation ‘brujería’ because of its specificity. It identified so precisely “the magic of blacks,” as opposed to “the word hechicería for the magic of whites”: “Upon entering the
study of the Afro-Cuban through the path of [the brujo’s] typical relations with the
supernatural, I adopted for my book the expression, technically and philosophically improper
but vernacularly and socially precise” (196; ¶10). This precision ran counter to Lachatañeré’s
claim that Ortiz’s use of ‘brujería’ reproduced an indiscriminate “occidental meaning” that
encompassed every form of heresy. Moreover, Ortiz contends that in Los negros brujos he
even had attempted to categorize “the magic of blacks” in its full diversity:

And later, in the course of my essay I try to go about separating, in the group of
so-called brujos, the functions of the priest, those of the doctor, and those of
the fortune-teller, and, after that, the criminal aspects in which at times those
activities can manifest; not only those activities strictly of brujería or of black
magic but rather all of the tendencies of antisocials, such as the false miracle,
the capricious bilongo, the fraudulent okpelé, and illicit healing practices.

Lachatañeré insists that the fundamental problem lies with Afro-Cuban studies stems from
Ortiz’s lack of categorical precision. In his response here, Ortiz asserts that his attention to
specificity in the 1906 study reveals an opposite methodological failure: ‘brujería’ was too
“vernacularly and socially precise.” It had strong popular connotations that enveloped the
specificity of Ortiz’s discussion and rendered it “technically and philosophically improper”
(196; ¶10).

In this way, Ortiz’s historical reflections on terminology redirect the issue away from
his role toward the larger issue of how the production and reception of his 1906 text reflect
the social dynamics of the period. “If it is true that the word brujo expressed confusion,” he
states, “this same confusion is already by itself a social phenomenon that was important to
clear up” (196; ¶10; emphasis added). In other words, in interpreting the first decade of the
twentieth century in Cuba Ortiz situates his study as an effect, not a cause, of social
discrimination. He suggests that, despite his best efforts, his nuanced portrayal of Afro-
Cuban practices was swept up in an ongoing power struggle in which certain elements
inevitably get coded as “magic,” that is, as socially unacceptable, “heterodox” forms. This jumbling of his historically informed articulation of brujería with the “philosophically improper but vernacularly and socially precise” popular meaning of the term is what Ortiz means by the point that “confusion is already by itself a social phenomenon.” His key assertion, then, is that the distinction between “magic” and “religion” stems from and reinforces a society’s balance of power, and use of the categories illuminates those power relations. This standpoint informs his statement in the first paragraph of the article that “it seems unacceptable today that both concepts are confused” by “schools of anthropology [that] essentially do not distinguish religion from magic.”

The last paragraph of the article reviews some of the specifics of Ortiz’s genealogy to reasserts the same idea about the basis of the “magic”/”religion” distinction. In making the point, Ortiz also practices what he preaches: he deliberately refers in the passage to “socially predominant and politically and legally coercive” institutions as “religion” and uses “magic” to describe groups not considered “orthodox”:

Thus, all of the magico-religious phenomenology of the black was considered by the white as brujería, such that every black priesthood of Africa—whose magic, not being orthodox ‘as God mandates’ conspires with the spirit of evil—qualifies as ‘dangerous heretics’ to the priests of the subordinating and outsider, or rival, religion. In the same way that, for still more complex reasons but socially analogous, all of the mass of black African slaves, because of the exoticism of all of their customs and languages, was considered by dominating whites as included—ipso facto—in the social category of ‘the bad life.’ This is all to say, the life not accepted as good, which is—naturally!—that of the group that is socially predominant and politically and legally coercive. (197; ¶12)

But if “the magico-religious phenomenology” demonstrates that the “magic”/”religion” distinction surfaces from—and, in turn, describes—a society’s relations of power, Ortiz reminds his readers that power is fundamentally a material issue. That is, the struggle for “social power” unfolds from the impulse to gain control over material
circumstances. Lachatañeré supports this idea in “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans” by noting “that as soon as religion approaches brujería it acts as an agent of repression […], intimately connected with the repressive power of the State.” He then grounds these repressive actions in “a purely economic motive” that leads priests to “accus[e] an enemy of such practices to dispossess them of their assets.” Lachatañeré follows up this point about “a purely economic motive” by taking a look at the other, ‘repressed’ side. Namely, he moves to his example of ‘working a shadow,’ with which he demonstrates how forms of “magic” also arise from a desire for material gain: the practitioner works a shadow in order to gain some advantage “in order to triumph in life.”

Ortiz also reinforces this critical foundation to Lachatañeré argument. In outlining the social dynamics that produce categories of magic and religion, Ortiz turns to examples of magic to underscore a primordial human concern about material conditions. First, he suggests that the marginalization of certain social elements in terms of “magic” stems from the perception that those entities threaten the physical wellbeing of “socially predominant” sectors. Ortiz traces these fear across time and place, as evidenced in his observations that “for the white Catholic, all of the black cultuses were brujería” just as the term held “that same disdain that, in days gone by, was unanimous among the believers of one African cultus against those of another.” Ortiz connects the power of categorization to a more fundamental struggle to determine human existence itself. In underscoring the socio-economic—and non-racialist—origins of social action, Ortiz arrives at his other crucial assessment that “realities such as these arise—one can not deny—among whites and blacks alike because pigmentations have nothing to do with credulities and mischief.”
As does Lachatañeré’s case of ‘working a shadow,’ Ortiz’s specific examples of magic convey the purported material stakes in the constitution and operation of social categories. Again, he follows Lachatañeré’s lead by examining some cases of “magic” that demonstrate how each stems from a unique economic base in which all of the actors seek material gain:

"Today, there is no doubt that at times in the most marginalized sectors of the ancestral traditions there are skeptical or exceedingly gullible subjects, who, by believing in everything or by not believing concretely in anything, sing to Babalú Ayé, light incense to Saint Lazarus, or prepare—for anyone who will pay—a spell to ‘lasso in’ a good catch that acts elusive." (196-97; ¶11)

The examples clearly parallel Lachatañeré’s discussion of ‘working a shadow.’ In this case, Ortiz mentions “a spell to ‘lasso in’ a good catch.” The practice immediately invokes Lachatañeré’s reference to how “a person ‘grabs the shadow of another’ [in] seizing their good dispositions in order to triumph in life.” And, once again, Ortiz universalizes these efforts to “triumph in life.” After offering the examples of so-called “magical” practices, Ortiz adds, “This [kind of propitiatory activity] occurs in the peripheral zones of all social groups” (197).

Ortiz offers rich images of magical practices to support his argument that “magic”—as a name for “marginalized” activities “in the peripheral zones”—is a universal social reality constituted in the struggle for access to material resources. Here too Ortiz’s response both supplements and diverges from Lachatañeré critique. Lachatañeré says very little in "The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans" about the specifics of either brujería or “the original religion” he designates ‘santería.” In contrast, Ortiz provides a full list of types, artifacts, and practices associated with “magic.” One striking component of his genealogy is his catalogue of “essential attributes that one says are characteristic of Afro-American brujería,” in which he enumerates “magic, exorcisms, trances, possessions, ecstasies, spells, incantations,
rances, amulets, charms,” and so forth. In another place, he refers to the “rites among black slaves, with strange liturgies and exotic music, and with unintelligible sing-songs. And still further on, he mentions “not only those activities strictly of brujería or of black magic but rather all of the tendencies of antisocials, such as the false miracle, the capricious bilongo, the fraudulent okpelé, and illicit healing practices.”

By associating “magic” with these specific elements, Ortiz faces the danger of reinforcing the images that he and Lachatañeré supposedly want to disrupt. However, his intention is to show that “magic”—as a “regulating concept” that marginalizes elements considered unorthodox—does not merely exist in ecclesiastical or scholarly writings. Rather, magic, as a socially constituted category, is a social reality. Just as magic saturated Spanish culture in the sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries, so has it ‘been made’ to exist in contemporary societies as well. In this way, Ortiz further explicates Lachatañeré’s argument: certain categories of knowledge possess the magical power to transform themselves from ideas into lived realities.

4.

Through his mediations on magic, Ortiz turns back on the magical potential in Lachatañeré’s intervention. He reasserts the possible impact of the fiction of santería:

Actually, the best treatment that the black and his things will continue to receive, apart from the general cultural expansion making itself known in Cuba, would come from the substitution of the term santería for the word brujería; and this is very plausible because it tends to cast away inexcusable incomprehensions and indecent diversions. (196; ¶9)

Ortiz mimics Lachatañeré by posing “the substitution of the term santería for the word brujería” as an optical affair: the “plausible” move would provide clarity of perspective by “cast[ing] away inexcusable incomprehensions and indecent diversions.” In Ortiz’s view, the
plausibility of the new vocabulary—its status as “a legitimate and well-formed cubanismo”—stems largely from the fact that ‘santería’ revalues familiar words. As Lachatañeré explains in proposing the term, it derives from the “new type of deity of well-differentiated characteristics that is known among the Afro-Cuban believers under the name of el santo.” In turn, the figures that coordinate the ritual veneration of these deities, or ‘saints,’ are known as ‘santeros’ or ‘santeras.’

Ortiz weaves another thread into the expanding critical genealogy that runs from Lachatañeré’s article through his own. Once again, Ortiz explicates important unstated implications in Lachatañeré’s discussion. He explains how Lachatañeré’s “legitimate and well-formed cubanismo,” in displacing “the false application of the term ‘brujería,’” revalues familiar meanings of ‘santero/santera’ and of ‘santería’ itself: He notes, “The term santero is a very traditional word that appears in old dictionaries to signify someone devoted to the icons of a superstitious and indiscreet cultus” (196; ¶9). For that reason, Ortiz likes Lachatañeré’s transvaluation of the terms because it redeems marginalized social actors, in one move, and, in another, captures an underlying—if somewhat misguided—sense of morality endemic to the santero.

Without a doubt, [‘santero’] was originally applied by those same Spanish clergy to the blacks that in their confraternities [cabildos] venerated Mersé, Caridad, or Saint Barbara with unorthodox rites. With the word santero one expressed also something ecclesiastically disdainful and indecent in relation to the proper ritual conduct ‘as God mandates’; but in its pejorative sense it did not arrive—not even closely—at the slanderous meaning of the word brujo. The santeras a mistaken one who adores celestial and good entities; the brujo is a pervert who adores infernal and evil entities. (196; ¶9)

This last sentence encapsulates Ortiz’s main point and also validates Lachatañeré’s argument: typologies of belief flow from a society’s structure of power. “The group that is socially predominant and politically and legally coercive” enforces the terms by which a
society operates. Thus, ‘brujo’ and ‘santeró’—the two distinct but related figures that serve as the title of Ortiz’s response—both “express something ecclesiastically disdainful and indecent in relation to the proper ritual conduct ‘as God mandates.’” Still, the distinct types of adoration are valued differently. While the santero may be “mistaken,” his social status diverges notably from the “pervert” brujo. Status, Ortiz insists, is a relative value determined by configurations of social power.

5.

Ortiz’s portrayal of the relativity of value carries conflicting undertones. Something else surfaces in his distinction between santeras “mistaken one” and brujo “pervert.” Does Ortiz really think that value is entirely relative? His other work, including the January 1937 inaugural lecture, reveals that he had clear opinions about and preferences for certain kinds of ideas and actions. The “biotic” perspective of “Religion in Poesía Mulata” filters into “Brujos or Santeros.” Like Lachatañeré’s “The Religious Beliefs of Afro-Cubans,” Ortiz’s response esteems certain ideologies over others. It privileges systems of belief that attuned to the material parameters and materialist impulses of human endeavors. These preferences once again draw Ortiz reluctantly toward magic. Most of his discussion focuses on how struggles for social power circumscribe particular sectors of society as “heterodox” and prone to false logic and transgressions of “magic.” Ortiz clearly sympathizes with the “antisocials” and “marginalized sectors.” They suffer unfairly for the false representations thrust upon them, and Ortiz fights for a measure of justice on their behalf. He works to unsettle “regulating concepts,” as Lachatañeré called to them. And, like Lachatañeré, Ortiz
admires the bombast of so-called “magicians” who turn to “spells, incantations, amulets, charms,” and the like as their own means of intervention.

Ortiz’s solidarity with the magicians emerges as he brings “Brujos or Santeros” to a close. The defining force of “socially predominant and politically and legally coercive” sectors, he explains, “can be comprehended more easily today, after forty years of research on Africa and with numerous museums and journals of Afrology now covering the most diverse aspects of black populations” (197; ¶12). In Ortiz’s estimation, the wider dissemination of “research on Africa” enables a much clearer view of the true nature of human activity: it unfolds within the ongoing contest for power over material resources. Ortiz celebrates the recent rise of “the dispossessed” in this continual struggle. “Above all, the great awakening of the dispossessed in this twentieth century has diffused greatly the elemental and basic criteria of social evolution and of the determinism of their factors, which favors objective comprehension” (197; ¶12). Ortiz offers his own contributions to “Afrology” as a way to advance that “great awakening of the dispossessed.”

Nevertheless, Ortiz’s concluding remarks also demonstrate the ambivalence in his alliance with magic. His sympathy and grudging respect falls well short of outright acceptance. As in so many of his writings, Ortiz openly dismisses the “credulities and mischief” and “all of the tendencies of antisocials” that “arise among whites and blacks alike.” He adopts a similarly judgmental air when he notes, “there are skeptical or exceedingly gullible subjects” who turn to magic “by believing in everything or by not believing concretely in anything.” For Ortiz, these “most marginalized sectors” are exceedingly selfish. Magic functions for them only as a tool for self-enrichment.
And it is on that point that Ortiz moves toward displacing magic. He figures another kind of magic that would not fall prey to “credulities and mischief.” His methods serve the collective—and especially the collective Cuban—good. Thus, he concludes “Brujos or Santeros” by lauding Lachatañeré’s work, with its “legitimate and well-formed cubanismo,” as a significant contribution to the development of Cuban character:

*Afro-Cuban Studies* has to feel very satisfied that the figure of Rómulo Lachatañeré, already acclaimed for a book treating the folklore of Lucumí mythology in Cuba, would dedicate his efforts to these ethnographic aspects, as much or even more indispensable to the knowledge of the national soul of Cuba than the episodes of the Romencero del Cid or the picaresque life of Rinconete and Cortadillo. (197; ¶12)

The summary statement is classic Ortiz. As he lauds Lachatañeré’s efforts for their role in shaping Cuban identity, he makes sure to establish the island’s distance for Spain. *El Cid* and the narratives of Rinconete and Cortadillo ground Spanish identity, but Ortiz dismisses their importance for Cubans. Nevertheless, as he reveals without reservation in his preceding discussion, Afro-Cuban studies emerged *in Spain* 1901 in another of Ortiz’s acts of dissociation. It appears that Cuban intellectuals’ displacing magic relates intimately to the experience of displacement, after all.
 Generally, one interprets *religion* as the binding or tying of man as slave to supernatural or divine power, which is the Lord.[…] What seems to be clearer is to think about how the term *religio* signified a binding of man with superhuman mystery, capable of two expression or attitudes.

Fernando Ortiz

1.

Over the course of the introduction and past six chapters, I have tracked the figure of magic as it appears, in various guises, within a field of early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse. As I forewarned at the outset, my explorations have taken a circuitous route. I began with a scene: on a tropical winter’s eve in 1942 Fernando Ortiz stands at a podium in Havana’s Club Atenas and delivers a speech on past, present, and future race relations in Cuba. From that scene, I cut to and through many others: Ortiz in January 1937, giving another lecture from the same spot in Club Atenas; Alejo Carpentier in 1948, almost ten years after his return to the Americas from more than a decade of residence in Paris, confronting Surrealism and other interwar European intellectual trends; the cultural and personal flights of Cuban intellectuals during the 1920s and 1930s, when political life on the island moved through Machado’s rise to and fall from power, a short-lived Revolutionary Government, and in its wake the emergence of Fulgencio Batista as another enduring strongman; the international popularity of Nicolás Guillén and his poem “Sensemayá” during that especially tumultuous period around 1933; Guillén’s sweet and celebratory recollections
in 1951 on the occasion of Rómulo Lachatañeré’s untimely death; a decade earlier, Lachatañeré’s surprising critical engagement with Ortiz; the latter’s firm but concurring reply…. So, with all of those cuts, a discussion that opened with Ortiz’s early 1942 talk comes back almost to where it started: commentary from Ortiz in a short essay carrying a 1939 publication date but actually composed and distributed around 1941.

That last disjunction between purported and actual dates fits my study. One of my main points has been that a sense of dislocation inhabits the field of Cuban intellectual discourse through which I have moved back and forth, forth and back. What echoes through my discussion—as it winds from Ortiz’s 1942 speech to his “1939” reply to Lachatañeré—is an invocation of “magic” as object and means to displace. As I have highlighted, the ambivalence surrounding magic reflects Cuban intellectuals’ competing attitudes toward and their experiences of modernity. All of these writers badly want to help Cuba and Cubans “modernize.” On one hand, a certain kind of “magic”—the type endemic to “primitives”—stands in the way. This magic was brought from Africa with slaves and seems to remain in Cuba. It depends upon a profound misunderstanding of what makes things happen in the world. In this magical perspective, people can willfully change the course of events through a properly enacted material representation. On the other hand, Cuban intellectuals admire the desire for change and the claim to agency implicit in such magical pursuits. The writers want to seize upon, to redirect the redemptive drive of primitive magic. They try to displace it from Cuba in order to displace elements of contemporary modernity. And, in that regard, “magic” takes on other possibilities for Cuban intellectuals as a tool both to diagnose and to transform so-called “modern” life. They see magic as a fitting description for the illogical process of commodification in which money assumes status as ultimate cause and, in turn, as a primary
object of faith. All the writers agree that modern commodification negatively affects Cuba and Cubans. In an effort ‘to fight fire with fire,’ “magical” interventions arise within the intellectual discourse as a powerful way to break the spell of what Ortiz clearly identifies as “the magic power of money.” Most immediately, the intellectuals’ magic entails the production of willful representations to enact specific material effects. Such representations often emerge as cubanismsos and other forms of ‘dialectical images.’

2.

I contend, once again, that the circuitous nature of my discussion reflects the inevitable nervousness of the Cuban intellectual discourse of displacing magic. Ortiz, Carpentier, Guillén, Lachatañeré and other participants in the discourse sense that they are caught up in what Michael Taussig more recently has called “the Nervous System” of modernity. As part of this “system,” intellectuals try to reconstitute material conditions under which they and others live. It is a paradoxical endeavor that necessitates the displacement of “primitive magic” as well as “the magic power of money” through other “magical” practices. In the face of a perceived lack of control, these early-twentieth-century Cubans seek a measure of control through intellectual production. And, to some extent, they accomplish their objectives. Their efforts often produce real consequences that, on the writers’ own terms, are magical. The effects stem from actions deliberately pursued. Still, the intellectuals find that that their efforts do not necessarily produce intended results. Acting with a nervous system, the Cubans try to straighten out things that will never come out entirely straight.

From that standpoint, my account has revolved around two interrelated developments: the emergence of the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies around the beginning of 1937 and the
subsequent production of the term ‘santería’ out of that institutional context. I have outlined how both developments surfaced magically within the Cuban intellectual discourse of displacing magic. According to Ortiz’s own explanation, the Society emerged three decades after he rearticulated the little-known nineteenth-century word “Afro-Cuban.” He indicated that his willful act had turned into reality: by the early 1940s his linguistic revindication had “been incorporated into common parlance,” and the terminology finally had enabled an intellectual organization dedicated to “Afro-Cuban” history and culture. Similarly, around 1941 Rómulo Lachatañeré offered his own linguistic revaluation as critique of the magical consequences of Ortiz’s foundational 1906 project. He offered an original use of the familiar term “santería” in order to displace the entrenched association—ostensibly established by Ortiz—between “Afro-Cuban” and the criminally inclined magical practice of “brujería.” “Santería” functioned as Lachatañeré’s own dialectical image, a composite representation that could magically bring to fruition his desire to displace “brujería.” Like Ortiz, Lachatañeré’s spell worked to a great extent, yet it played out differently than he expected. Just as “Afro-Cuban” and “brujería” did before it, “santería” has moved into the global vocabulary to designate an international reality that—against Lachatañeré’s best intentions—often surfaces in popular images as a domain of criminally inclined magical practices. Such are the workings of the modern discourse circuits that produced the idea of “magic” in the first place.

3.
All of my examples of magic in and of early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual discourse arise from considerations of and by Fernando Ortiz. I have focused especially on some of his work as well as on texts by Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén and Rómulo Lachatañeré that directly or indirectly engage Ortiz’s production. Since he stands as the central figure in the discourse of displacing magic, my discussion—even with all of its necessary nervousness—appropriately begins and ends with Ortiz. As means of conclusion, I will examine one more invocation of magic by Ortiz. The example serves as an epilogue in that it falls at the far end—or, really, just beyond—the chronological boundaries I marked off for my study.

This case involves a slight essay entitled “Magia y religión” [Magic and Religion] that Ortiz completed in July of 1956. As the title of the piece indicates, Ortiz offers definitions of and distinctions between the two key terms. He carries out the task in two pages. In that narrow space, he delineates a relationship between religion and magic that effectively captures many of the theoretical conclusions he had reached over the course of five decades of engagement with the issue. The essay appears as a capstone to Ortiz’s ongoing theorization of religion and magic. And, in distilling a half-century of Ortiz’s intellectual labor, “Magic and Religion” also encapsulates the critical dynamics of the Cuban intellectual discourse on magic that has served as the subject of my discussion. Therefore, I look to the 1956 essay here as a useful summary of major points. Nevertheless, the essay also differs in significant ways from the other texts that I have discussed. Those sources lead into the very early 1950s, with Carpentier’s prologue from 1948 and Guillén’s 1951 eulogy of Lachatañeré as the latest examples. The peculiarities of Ortiz’s 1956 essay in relation to the other work I have discussed suggest that, by the mid-1950s, changes in the discourse of
displacing magic were becoming more palpable. The contrast throws into greater relief the contours of Cuban intellectual discourse during the 1930s and 1940s.

An immediate and significant difference involves the process of reflection. Each of the earlier sources that I examined employs a common rhetorical move: the writers offer intellectual accounts in which they explicitly or implicitly place themselves. In all of the other texts by Ortiz, he gives a history of Afro-Cuban studies by way of personal reflection. He recounts his own histories in various ways to describe how the field developed. In a similar way, Carpentier addresses his own relationship to Surrealism, Guillén recollects his time with Lachatañeré as well as the unsettling discovery of the latter’s death, and Lachatañeré delineates the suspect history of the terms and methods of Afro-Cuban studies that he has inherited.

To some extent, Ortiz’s 1956 essay makes the same reflexive move. “Magic and Religion” also reviews existing scholarship in order to argue for changes in theories and methods used in Afro-Cuban studies. But, unlike the earlier sources, Ortiz stands noticeably outside of the text. He does not reflect on his own history; rather, “Magic and Religion” is a short essay about reflection. More specifically, in the piece Ortiz tries to account for role that theoretical contemplation plays in magic and religion. Key to his argument is the claim that, contrary to established scholarly opinions, both magic and religion necessarily depend upon “theory.” This contention already hints that the essay differs from the earlier work not only on matters of style. The absence in the essay of personal details represents a decided shift toward “theory” as praxis. In his preceding work, Ortiz used various rhetorical devices to call his audience’s attention to theorization and its effects, but he never really offered an explicit theory of “theory.” He does so in “Magic and Religion,” setting forth a quick yet powerful
argument about theory as means to power. He implied as much before; in the 1956 essay he states it outright.

In doing so, he revisits issues about the relationship between “theory” and “practice” that are familiar in the discourse of displacing magic. Such questions directly connect early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual endeavors with debates among Kant’s immediate intellectual successors. In a marked shift, Ortiz points in “Magic and Religion” toward a politics of culture that now leans toward Hegel’s Idealism and away from Schlegel’s Romanticism. He no longer suggests that radical change must come through an intoxicating loss of consciousness that creates social bonds. Rather, Ortiz gestures toward heightened consciousness—theoretical endeavors—as a profoundly transformative experience. In fact, he even implies the impossibility among moderns of the lack of consciousness that enables collective cohesion among “primitives.” As in the sources from the 1930s and 1940s, the dialectic, with its hope for redemption in synthesis, remains the operative model. However, “Magic and Religion” privileges Engel’s “subjective dialectics”—the confrontational dynamic of thought—over the “objective dialectics” in which the encounter of matter primarily determines the human world. As always, theorization of magic and religion assume strategic import in the discourse of displacing magic, but in Ortiz’s 1956 essay the theories appear as effective actions rather than as means to greater political ends.

The literal place of “Magic and Religion” makes more apparent Ortiz’s argument in the essay for theory as political. Unlike the other essays I have examined, the 1956 piece offers no explicit vision of strategic possibilities. Rather, the politics of “Magic and
Religion” are implicit in the text’s content as well as in its location. The essay belongs to a book and occupies a curious position there. According to Ortiz’s own postscript to “Magic and Religion,” he wrote the piece in Havana during July of 1956 and sent it off shortly thereafter for inclusion in a project released the following year by a Mexican publishing house. Thus, the piece only appears in a 1957 volume dedicated to the honor of Rafael Heliodoro Valle, one of Ortiz’s friends and intellectual companions (Romero de Valle 1957). Most of the contributors to the honorary volume submitted personal reflections about Valle or appreciations of his professional endeavors. Amidst the other pieces in the volume, Ortiz’s concise theoretical reflections stand out. That sense of peculiarity only heightens in light of the fact that Ortiz surely had plenty to say about Valle. In addition to time they had spent together as friends, the two men shared numerous affinities of interest and experience as widely admired comrades-in-arms in a half-century of struggle for Latin American economic, political, and cultural sovereignty.

Valle had played many roles in different sites around the world over the first half of the twentieth century in a professed commitment to serve his nation and his region. Born in Honduras in 1891, Valle had settled in Mexico in 1907 to pursue university and graduate studies. After securing an academic appointment at Mexico City’s famous Universidad Autónoma Nacional, Valle maintained his primary residence there until his death in 1959. His intellectual endeavors varied widely, and he earned recognition throughout Latin America for historical studies of the region, frequent essays on culture, journalism, and innovative poetic explorations. Despite his deep roots in Mexico, Valle maintained his natal allegiances to Honduras. These loyalties carried him abroad in diplomatic roles, including an
extended turn in Washington, D.C. between 1949 and 1956 as Honduras’ ambassador to the United States.

In the course of my discussion, I have touched on various details of Ortiz’s personal and public life. Clear parallels between Valle and Ortiz emerge on many levels. With so many obvious possibilities for prolonged reflection about Valle, why did Ortiz submit an unusually short essay that never mentions Valle by name and has no apparent links to him? Ortiz was renowned for outsized expressions of admiration toward and acts of support for his friends and intellectual companions. Rather, Ortiz clearly intended his peculiar contribution to stand on its own as a heartfelt homage to Valle. Thus, the essay’s position in a volume dedicated to a tireless social reformer illuminates Ortiz’s conception of the essay as an act of social intervention. Ortiz offers a theory as a profoundly political maneuver that circumvents, and possibly displaces, traditional politics. Ortiz clearly hoped to connect his theoretical piece with Valle’s own struggle for national and regional sovereignty. Both men had entered the political sphere, and both had faced challenges there that led to a certain measure of disillusionment and, eventually, to retreat from that domain. From that standpoint, Ortiz’s theory of theory belongs to an era of Latin American intellectual activity in which culture—including theories of culture—served as a domain of intervention that replaced more traditional political pursuits.

Still, the cultural politics figured in Ortiz’s 1956 essay differed from earlier contributions to the discourse of displacing magic. The particular dialectical perspective of “Magic and Religion”—its drift away from a Romantic sensibility and toward Idealism—
becomes immediately apparent. Ortiz dedicates most of his short discussion to sharpening the distinctions between the two key terms of the title. However, as he does so, he makes a simultaneous move toward synthesis. He uses his sharper characterizations of magic and religion to collapse major differences between them. Ortiz reconciles these seemingly contradictory gestures by arguing that magic and religion are, in fact, “two expressions or attitudes” of the same fundamental impulses. In reinforcing a critical point repeated by Carpentier, Guillén, and Lachatañeré as well as in his own 1937 and 1939 pieces, Ortiz casts human action as fundamentally a quest for power. This pursuit necessarily entails a struggle to control external forces. According to Ortiz, religion and magic are distinct manifestations of that same will to power, and he suggests that religio—the etymological root of religion—implies an act of lashing together that illuminates common foundations. From this standpoint, the predominant dynamic of “Magic and Religion” is one of unbinding in order to bind together again at a more profound level.167

Ortiz mimics his subject in a curious way: By centering his discussion on religio as a sign of the human compulsion toward binding, Ortiz separates magic and religion as historical phenomena so that he can tie them together again at the level of primordial impulses. Thus, his insistence on those binding human compulsions situates his essay squarely within the tradition of modern primitivist theory. The primitivism of “Magic and Religion” surfaces in the very first clause of the essay when Ortiz identifies the same human tendency in two different archaic locations, one chronological (“the most remote times”) and the other evolutionary (“the most primitive cultures”). He contends that by looking at those

167 Ortiz’s relative assurance about the etymological root of “religion” is interesting in light of the long-running disagreements on the issue among scholars of religion. For a helpful review of and contribution to those debates, see Smith 1998.
arches—or ‘openings’—the observer can recognize comparable motivations that arise from one undeniable fact: human understanding is inherently limited. Something in the world—in fact, most of it—remains mysterious. Accordingly, Ortiz links all human action back to the most basic human inclination of all: to confront the world dialectically, first and foremost through theoretical knowledge, in an ongoing struggle for control. That process plays out in different ways, through different “attitudes,” even as the production of always-tentative “knowledge” never fully dissolves the mystery. People are left to fabricate ideas about how the world really is and to act accordingly on those very real fictions.

“Since the most remote times and in the most primitive cultures,” Ortiz begins the human being, moved at the same time by fear and hope before the mystery of nature and its forces and by unavoidable contact, has operated by adopting offensive-defensive attitudes that have their own underlying similarities. He has tried to dominate and overcome with force or threat, or by enduring or adapting himself through submission or supplication. (Ortiz 1957: 249; ¶1) According to these terms, the actions of humans—or “man,” in Ortiz’s gendered language—always correlate to “offensive-defensive attitudes.” This clarification makes the line between magic and religion much easier to delineate. Ortiz links magic to “offensive” postures—those attempts “to dominate and overcome with force or threat”—while he associates “religion” with man’s “defensive” stance of “enduring or adapting himself through submission or supplication.” He moves to metaphor to sharpen the contrast:

Magic is the belief in mysterious powers to which one wants to lay hold through domination, and in order to locate and propitiate them one has to use domineering, compelling, accursed, or conjuring methods. Magic is force and law. Religion is the belief in the mysterious supernatural powers to which one feels bound by subordination, and in order to propitiate and earn favor from them one has to supplicate them through obedient and submissive prayer. Religion is grace and justice. (249; ¶1; emphases in original)

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168My translation of “Magic and Religion” appears as Appendix C. In citing the essay, I include the page reference of the original text followed by the paragraph number of the corresponding translation.
Still, Ortiz’s initial description emphasizes that, with their common root in “fear and hope before the mystery of nature,” these distinct “offensive-defensive attitudes […] have their own underlying similarities.” He moves quickly toward that common ground by considering the etymological roots of religion. That move enables Ortiz to posit the crucial and inextricable connection between divergent “attitudes.” In magic and religion alike, people try to control the supernatural in a way that inverts the familiar human-divine relationship:

The Latin term *religio* seems to derive from *religare*, which signifies ‘to bind’ or ‘to tie.’ Generally, one interprets *religion* as the binding or tying of man as slave to supernatural or divine power, which is the Lord. But Westermarck is of the opinion that in that regard *religio* was not man bound to God but rather God bound to man. Better is to think that the term *religio* signified a binding of man with superhuman mystery, capable of two expression or attitudes. (249; ¶2)

Ortiz reframes his definitions of magic and religion according to this idea that both of the “expressions or attitudes” seek to lash divine power to human endeavors instead of vice versa. According to his reformulation, magic remains “offensive,” while religion now appears as diplomatic rather than merely “defensive”:

If man ties the mysterious potency and dominates it, the binding is *magic*; if he is the bound one, then the binding is *religion*, more precisely said. That manner of conduct, social or political, that is war among people, with the mysterious, is *magic*; this other mode, which in interhuman relations is diplomacy, with the mysterious is *religion*. (249; ¶2)

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169 The original passage reads “Watermark is of the opinion […].” The reference certainly includes a typographical error or a misreading of Ortiz’s handwriting. He undoubtedly alludes to Edvard Alexander Westermarck (1862-1939), who was a pioneer in social anthropology. Westermarck was born and raised in Finland but spent much of his adult life in England, where he served as Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science (simultaneously with an appointment in practical philosophy at the University of Helsinki. Westermarck’s comparative studies of marriage and sexuality functioned as the core of his research and the primary source of his fame. The topic also grounded Westermarck’s forays into moral philosophy. In his last work, *Christianity and Morals* (1939), Westermarck critiqued the popular idea that Christianity propelled progress with a theological drive toward ultimate truth. Here Ortiz gives his own rendering of Westermarck’s controversial argument that the idea of “God” derives from scientific inquiry and not vice versa. For more on Westermarck and his theoretical discussions of religion, see Strouop 1982.
In either case, whether through the belligerency of magic or with the diplomacy of religion, people actively try to control “mysterious potency” as it plays in human worlds.

His turn to etymology allows Ortiz to create the double bind in which religion and magic are bound together as acts of binding. He uses the remainder of his short essay to reinforce, from different angles, this sense of indissoluble ties. Ortiz switches from etymology to genealogy of predominant conceptions of magic and religion. He immediately dismisses two influential theories on account of their strict chronological evolutionism, which categorically misrecognizes the necessary simultaneity of magic and religion as different manifestations of the same struggle:

No longer does the opinion seem acceptable of the famous Frazer, for whom magic precedes religion in the development of culture.170 According to him, at the beginning there is no religion; it is only and everywhere magic. Nor has predominated the theory of P. Schmidt, who takes an inverse perspective; the monotheistic religion was first, through divine revelation, and magic was nothing but a degeneration[250] of the Adamic truth. (249-50; ¶3)171

Ortiz is more sympathetic to a third view that recognizes the inseparability of magic and religion, but he finds fault in the theory’s essentialized characterization of each phenomenon:

“For Arnold Van Gennep, in his beautiful work Les Rytes de Passage (1909), magic and religion—the former as practice and the latter as theory—are indissoluble. It does not seem that this is acceptable on account of the distinction between one and the other” (250; ¶3).

The engagement with Van Gennep’s work is a pivotal moment in Ortiz’s discussion. It allows him to rely on the Van Gennep’s authoritative notion that “magic and religion are

170Ortiz alludes to James George Frazer (1854-1941), author of the monumental The Golden Bough. The comparative study of religion was first released in 1890 as two volumes. Frazer continually expanded the work until it reached twelve volumes by 1915. The critically acclaimed, one-volume abridgement appeared in 1922. Refer above to my earlier discussion (pp. 15 and 100f.) of Frazer, including consideration of Jorge Luis Borges’s critical use of The Golden Bough.

171Ortiz here refers to P. Wilhelm Schmidt [1868-1954] and his study The Origin and Growth of Religion (first published in 1912 and regularly expanded through 1955).
indissoluble” while turning that idea in another direction. In confronting Van Gennep’s objectionable separation of “theory” and “practice,” Ortiz comes to the points he especially wants to reinforce. First, he reverses Van Gennep’s move by asserting that conceptualization and actualization, like magic and religion, are also inextricably bound. He explains:

> There is theory and practice in both; ideas and conceptual systems and also technical matters of doing. In magic, force or mana is in the power of the magician himself, who knows how to marshal and marshals other extrahuman powers compelled to serve; it is not a matter of simple practice. In religion, sacred power lies in another, superior power to which one supplicates, at times through intermediaries, so that it serves but without making it oblige the supplicant; it is not only theory. (250; ¶4)

With this clarification, Ortiz introduces a sense of complexity that he thinks the other theories lack. Neither magic nor religion is simple, nor is one simpler than the other. Rather, the field of social action is always a perplexing mix of attitudes comprised of different components, such as: particular “ideas”; their incorporation into broader “conceptual systems”; and, related “technical matters of doing.” Ortiz implies that by distinguishing these different modes and their components as if the various elements never interacted together, scholars like Frazer, Schmidt, and Van Gennep end up expounding more simplistic “theory” than the ostensibly simple-minded phenomena those modern theorists purport to study.

However, in his response to Van Gennep, Ortiz also suggests that theory precedes practice even if each component surfaces in both attitudes. Practitioners of magic and religion alike confront the confusing social field most immediately through ideas about it. “Conceptual systems” and “technical matters of doing” only develop in the wake of engagement through thought. In other words, “theory” has a structuring force in human affairs because it is the means by which people come to terms with the confusion of the world, including their own confusing endeavors in it. But Ortiz’s response to Van Gennep narrows even further. He suggests that it is not only “theory” that precedes practice in both
magic and religion. Rather, specific theories—namely, conceptions of power—take precedence before all and really distinguish human endeavors. Thus, he reduces the difference between magic and religion to the fundamental notion of where power resides: magic rests on the idea that humans have power over the world; religion depends on the idea that external forces rule human life.

With his critical review of theories of religion, Ortiz has spiraled back in more focused terms to his initial characterizations of magic and religion. There too he had emphasized that both modes unfolded around theories of power that, in turn, enabled systems of practice (magic as “domineering, compelling, accursed, or conjuring methods” stemming from “the belief in mysterious powers to which one wants to lay hold through domination”; religion as “obedient and submissive prayer” inspired by “the belief in the mysterious supernatural powers to which one feels bound by subordination”). Now, only two paragraphs after presenting those opening characterizations, Ortiz reinforces them as a theoretical advance beyond the commonly recognized theories of magic and religion.

And, as if to prove a point about how those other theories remain simplistic with their unwarranted separation of categories, Ortiz immediately begins to call his own critical distinctions into question. Theoretical categorization, he suggests, is a powerful yet tentative undertaking. Conceptions of power, he goes on to say, are never as clear cut as those that he circumscribed in preceding paragraphs. “In the religions with present validity,” he notes, “many times the originarily magical concepts coincide and combine with religious ones, particularly in the most archaic, transcendental, and sacramental liturgies” (250; ¶4). With this new primitivist appeal to “the most archaic, transcendental, and sacramental liturgies”—which is to say, the ‘purest’ examples of magic and religion in practice—Ortiz once again
reiterates points made in his opening paragraph. In this case, he looks back even further, to his very first sentence, in which he had laid down the position that impulses—namely, “fear and hope before the mystery of nature”—precedes even theory. By his fourth paragraph, Ortiz has reduced “offensive-defensive attitudes” to a single “underlying similarity.” Both magic and religion are basically “offensive” after all:

In general every religious act, including the purest prayer, tends to impregnate itself with magical sentiment by asserting itself as a consequential ‘certainty,’ as if the supernatural powers remain totally obligated to the submissive human act and to the repetition of its words, gestures, and rites. (250; ¶4)

Religion obfuscates its will to power through passive aggression while magic, associated with “force and law” and “war,” lays bare the assertiveness of its desire to bind non-human forces in the struggle for control.

Ortiz has returned to the notion of “religiosity”—the “biotic desire to overcome”—ferreted out in his January 1937 talk on “religion in poesía mulata.” He has also reached the climax of his short discussion and, accordingly, offers two summary sentences: “In history, magic and religion frequently appear almost entirely intertwined, simultaneously or alternating. Human progress goes about separating them” (250; ¶4). In other words, he underscores the foundational dialectic between impulse and theory. Across the entire course of the human enterprise, people operate according to an underlying drive for control in the world while they also go about creating categories through which to distinguish their fundamentally similar efforts. Ortiz punctuates this point by showing how analysis of magic and religion extends to the present-day activities that are pulled apart by theory when, in fact, they share with magic and religion—and with each other—a common root in the will to power:

*Magic* continues to transform into science, which is magic already converted into human, truthful, and effective power. *Religion* goes about converting into
philosophy, which is the result of the rationalization of the religious. Yesterday was *magic* and *religion*, tomorrow will be *science* and *philosophy*. (250; ¶4)

“Magic” versus religion”; “science” versus “philosophy”; one set of endeavors converting into new forms. Ortiz makes a familiar primitivist gesture by posing the trajectory of “history” as a move away from primordial unity in a compulsive drive toward differentiation, which inevitably produces change. Such is the apparent price of “human progress” as it “goes about separating” entities otherwise intimately and indissolubly bound at the level of impulse.

In the fifth and last paragraph of his short essay, Ortiz tries to substantiate further the main points in his argument about the dialectic of impulse and theory. He offers a selection of cases that demonstrate the complexity of social endeavors. They resist categorization even as people seem compelled to that activity as part of the quest for control over the unknown:

It has come to pass that way among blacks as among whites. For the black Congo that we observe in Cuba, nkanga signifies ‘threat’ and its relational functions with the supernatural are inextricably like those of magic as well of religion. In the rest of the Afroid cults of Cuba, those brought from the Sudanese villages of Guinea, the religious rites of propitiation through prayers, sacrifices, dances, possessions, and positive and negative observations are more differentiated from those that are magical, but they consistently combine with them, with rites that are sacramental, divinatory, fetishistic, etc. (250; ¶5) Still, these “Afroid” traditions, in Cuba as elsewhere, are all examples of the universal human attempt to ‘bind up’ external forces and bend them to the will of the practitioner, whether his or her practices are called “magic,” “religion,” “science,” “philosophy,” or anything else.

In that way Plato talked about people that tied up the gods in order to make them fulfill the capturer’s wishes. In the Middle Ages they used to celebrate certain masses called “Masses of the Saintly Spirit,” with profane and harmful objectives, which they believed tied up the will of God Almighty, who had no choice but to do what the celebrants asked of Him. And many who were incredulous of the gods preserved in their conscience a profound and invincible fear of witches. (250; ¶5)
With these comparisons, Ortiz effectively achieves his goal. He pulls apart this propensity to binding—whether manifest as “religion,” as “magic,” or as a more typical combination of the two—so that he can tie all of the cases back together again with the primordial thread of impulse. Ortiz traces that filament as the invisible line that runs beneath the false supernaturalist order that sustains magic and religion and links it to science and philosophy and beyond. Accordingly, Ortiz can end his essay with an image of chaos that, in light of his identification of the new order organized around “fear and hope before the mystery of nature,” is not confusing at all. Ortiz concludes by reiterating the key point from his preceding paragraph: “Today, despite the progress of human culture, magic and religion still frequently surface intermingled in a confused magma of heteroclite ideas or in alternating situations or moments” (250-51). But by now we know that the jumble of ideas that appears at unpatterned times recurs according to another logic, one guided by the same will to make the forces of the world serve the practitioner regardless of the different means he might use and despite his divergent conceptions of the nature of those forces. From beginning to end, “Magic and Religion” puts the primitivism of theory on display.

6.

Still, Ortiz’s essay—even in its brevity and with its clear primitivism—is far from simple. In fact, Ortiz’s ostensible primitivity exposes “Magic and Religion” as a deliberate trick and places the article directly in the tradition of displacing magic. The essay turns back on itself and on its author and implicates both in an ongoing struggle for power. After all, “Magic and Religion” opens with and repeatedly reinforces the primitivist assertion that “since the most remote times and in the most primitive cultures, the human being, moved at
the same time by fear and hope before the mystery of nature and its forces and by
unavoidable contact, has operated by adopting offensive-defensive attitudes.” Ortiz never
disavows—and, in fact, openly situates his own efforts as consistent with—those timeless
impulses and their resultant “attitudes.” He leaves no way to distance himself from his claim
about animating motivations except by denying his own status as “human being.” Soon
enough, “Magic and Religion” makes the self-reflexivity explicit by casting “science” and
“philosophy” as contemporary manifestations of a basic quest for power. Ortiz makes the
implications clear: his essay, as an engagement with and contribution to social scientific
theory, should be taken as a form of science as well as philosophy; accordingly, “Magic and
Religion” internalizes aspects of both of the key terms of its title. As science, the essay
contains traces of “magic already converted into human, truthful, and effective power”; as
theory, or a form of philosophy, the article also unfolds as a kind of “rationalization of the
religious.”

But, of course, those same sentences about the common roots of magic, religion,
science and philosophy also reveal that Ortiz distances the latter two modes—and, by
extension, his own scientific and philosophical endeavors—from the first two attitudes. Once
again, he is engaged in displacing magic. Even if the expected undertakings of “tomorrow”
mimic the familiar enterprises of “yesterday” as “offensive-defensive” means through which
to bind superhuman mystery to man, that mimicry of “attitudes” necessarily alters the
original forms. Ortiz emphasizes the changes that results from the propensity in “human
progress” to differentiate, to “go about separating” fundamentally bound entities.” *Magic*
continues to transform into science”; “*religion* goes about converting into philosophy.”
The passage also reveals Ortiz’s ambivalent view of the differentiating and transforming compulsion that leads magic and religion toward science and philosophy. In highlighting the mixtures between and transformations of magic and religion, Ortiz displays a palpably unsympathetic tone toward the sensibility that inhabits both expressions. By “impregnating itself with magical sentiment,” religion falls into magic’s fatal trap of self-aggrandizement; in mimicking magical endeavors, “every religious act” overestimates its own power in fallaciously “asserting itself as a consequential ‘certainty,’” as if the supernatural powers remain totally obligated to the submissive human act and to the repetition of its words, gestures, and rites.” By adding a qualifying “as if,” Ortiz poses the magico-religious conception of “supernatural powers” as presumptuous and misguided. He extends his critique of magic and religion’s exaggerated sense of power to science and philosophy as well. As an assertion of “human, truthful, and effective power,” science also seems to take itself too seriously. Philosophy makes a similar mistake as it tries to re-enact religion’s false “submission” to external forces that it actually seeks to control by understanding and then propitiating them.

Thus, in the space of a short paragraph on the jumbled but inextricable ties between magic, religion, science, and philosophy, Ortiz’s essay simultaneously aligns itself with and distances itself from each of those “expressions” of the primordial will to power. Just as magic and religion engage the world dialectically though theory and practice, Ortiz’s brand of scientific-philosophic theory mimics its subjects by working on magic and religion—and, in turn, on science and philosophy—in order to transcend them. The essay posits an archaic ground of unity that can never be fully recovered due to the relentless drive in “human progress” to differentiate. Nor would Ortiz want human culture to collapse back entirely into
that point of origin since the result would be blind fear and ambition or, in a word, anomie.172 Ortiz’s essay implies that awareness of and reflection on primordial impulses is necessary to direct them toward logical and productive ends. Without self-reflexivity, the underlying will to power drifts toward the self-aggrandizement—and even self-destruction—that, according to Ortiz, plagues even contemporary science and philosophy.

Ortiz positions his own essay as an example of what the world needs now: a new combination of science and philosophy, namely, a theory-based practical system that is aware of its own magical and religious sensibilities. “Magic and Religion” points to and poses itself as the beginning of a new order. And, in working on magic and religion (and science and philosophy) in order to internalize their rightly directed drive and overcome their myopia, Ortiz’s short piece situates itself most closely with magic. As an active attempt to intervene in the march of “human progress” and to direct its theoretical differentiations toward its own will, “Magic and Religion” pursues “force and law” more than “grace and justice.” With all of its simultaneous associations and disassociations, the essay asserts itself as displacing magic. Like the earlier examples from Cuban intellectual discourse of the preceding decades, the piece is an open trick: it calls attention to its own ambitions and its own devices.

Nevertheless, the essay represents a different strain of displacing magic. With the reflexivity by which the essay affirms its practical impact as theory, “Magic and Religion” mimics the dynamics of Idealist dialectics. It gives epistemological primacy to the order of representation and then situates itself in that sphere as implicitly interventionist. As theory—and especially as a primitivist theory of theory—Ortiz’s essay casts itself as an aesthetic

172For more on the foundational importance of the notion of anomie to articulations of modernity, see Christopher Herbert’s (1991) enlightening genealogy of and readings around the formation of the culture concept.
maneuver that engages the failings of contemporary society and offers another avenue for political action outside of traditional politics.

But whether Ortiz’s project in this case falls closer to Hegel than Schlegel, Ortiz’s return to the fundamental questions regarding the status of knowledge necessarily differentiates him from the German intellectuals who preceded him by one-and-a-half centuries. Mimicry never exactly reproduces what it copies, and the transformation of Ortiz’s objects of imitation—theories of religion, magic, Romanticism, Idealism, Marxism—is precisely what he seeks. Alterity is the objective of his openly mimetic trick. And, in that way, “Magic and Religion” encapsulates modern Latin American intellectual endeavors and especially the early-twentieth-century discourse of displacing magic. As a reflection on ambivalent bindings, Ortiz’s short 1956 essay reveals his own ambivalent ties with the cultural and political legacies that converge on and in Cuba and Latin America.
APPENDIX A:

TRANSLATION OF ALEJO CARPENTIER’S “PROLOGUE” TO EL REINO DE ESTE MUNDO

...What must be understood concerning this matter of being transformed into wolves is that there is an illness that the doctors call wolf madness.

-The Works of Persiles and Segismunda

¶1 At the end of 1943 I had the good fortune to visit the kingdom of Henri Christophe—the ruins, so poetic, of Sans Souci; the imposing bulk of the Citadel of La Ferrière, intact in spite of thunderbolts and earthquakes—and to discover Ciudad del Cabo, still Norman to this day—the Cap Français of the former colony—where a street of very long balconies leads to a stone palace once occupied by Pauline Bonaparte. Having felt the indisputable charm of the Haitian landscape, having found magical portents in the red roads of the Central Plateau, and heard the drums of the Voodoo gods Petro and Rada, I was moved to compare the marvelous reality I had recently experienced with that exhausting attempt to invoke the marvelous which has characterized certain European literatures of the last thirty years. The marvelous, pursued in old prints of the forest of Brocelianda, of the knights of the Round Table, the wizard Merlin and the Arthurian cycle. The marvelous, pathetically evoked in the skills and deformities of fairground characters—will the young French poets never tire of the freaks and clowns of the circus, to which Rimbaud had already bade farewell in his Alchimie du verbe? The marvelous, produced by means of conjuring tricks, bringing together objects which would normally never meet: the old and fraudulent story of the chance encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on an operating table, which spawned the ermine spoons, snails in a rainy taxi, and the lion’s head in a widow’s pelvis of the Surrealist exhibitions. Or even the marvelous in literature: the kind of de Sade’s Juliette, Jarry’s supermale, Lewis’s monk, the blood-curdling theatrical props of the English Gothic novel: ghosts, walled-up priests, werewolves, hands nailed to the doors of castles.

¶2 But, determined to invoke the marvelous at any cost, the miracle workers turn into bureaucrats. Calling on timeworn formulae which reduce certain painting to a predictable jumble of drooping timepieces, dressmakers’ dummies, and vague phallic monuments, the marvelous is consigned to the umbrella or lobster or sewing machine, or whatever it may be, on an operating table, in the interior of a desolate room, in a desert of rocks. Imaginative poverty, Unamuno said, consists in learning codes by heart. And today there exist codes of the fantastic—based on the principle of the donkey devoured by a fig, proposed by the Chants de Maldoror as the supreme


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inversion of reality—to which we owe many “children threatened by nightingales,” or Andre Masson’s “horses devouring birds.” But note that when Andre Masson wanted to draw the jungle of the island of Martinique, with its incredible tangle of plants and the obscene promiscuity of certain of its fruits, the prodigious truth of the subject devoured the painter, leaving him all but impotent before the blank paper. And it was left to a painter from America, the Cuban Wilfredo Lam, to show us the magic of tropical vegetation, the unbridled Creation of Forms of our nature—with all its metamorphoses and symbioses—in monumental canvases of an expressiveness unique in contemporary painting. Confronted by the disconcerting imaginative poverty of a Tanguy, for example, who for twenty-five years has painted the same petrified larvae beneath the same grey sky, I am moved to repeat a dictum which filled the first crop of Surrealists with pride: “You who do not see, think of those who do.” There are still too many “adolescents who find pleasure in violating the corpses of beautiful women who have recently died,” (Lautreamont), without realizing that the truly remarkable thing would be to violate the living. But what many forget, in disguising themselves as cheap magicians, is that the marvelous becomes unequivocally marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (a miracle), a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed or singularly favorable illumination of the previously unremarked riches of reality, an amplification of the measures and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity due to an exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of ‘limit state.’ First of all, the sense of the marvelous presupposes a faith. Those who do not believe in saints will not be cured by the miracles of saints, nor will those who are not Don Quixotes be able to enter body and soul into the world of Amadís de Gaul or Tirant lo Blanc. Certain statements made by Rutilio in Los trabajos de Persiles y Segismunda about men being transformed into wolves are entirely trustworthy, because in Cervantes’ time it was believed that people could be afflicted with wolf madness. Likewise the journey of the character from Tuscany to Norway on a witch’s cloak. Marco Polo accepted that certain birds could fly carrying elephants in their claws, and Luther came face to face with the devil and threw an inkwell at his head. Victor Hugo, so exploited by the bookkeepers of the fantastic, believed in spirits, because he was convinced that he had spoken, in Guernsey, to the ghost of Léopoldine. It was sufficient for Van Gogh to believe in the Sunflower to fix his revelation on canvas. Thus the marvelous born of disbelief—as in the long years of Surrealism—was never more than a literary ruse, as tedious, after a time as certain brand of ‘ordered’ oneiric literature, certain eulogies of madness, with which we are all too familiar. But this is not, of course, to concede the argument to those who advocate a return to the real—a term which acquires, then, a gregariously political meaning—who do nothing more than substitute for the magician’s tricks the commonplaces of the committed man of letters or the eschatological humor of certain existentialists. But it is undoubtedly true that there is scant defense for poets and artists who praise sadism without practicing it, who admire a miraculous virility on account of their own impotence, who invoke spirits

174 Note with what prestige the works of Wilfredo Lam stand out, in their profound originality, among those of other painters collected in the special issue—an overview of modern art—published in 1946 by Cahiers d’Art [author’s note in original].
without believing in spells, and who found secret societies, literary sects, vaguely philosophical groups, with saints and signs and arcane objectives—never attained—without being able to conceive of a valid mysticism or abandon their petty habits in order to gamble their souls on the fearful card of faith.

§3 This became particularly clear to me during my stay in Haiti, where I found myself in daily contact with something which might be called the marvelous in the real. I was treading on land where thousands of men anxious for freedom had believed in the lycanthropic powers of Macandal, to the point where this collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution. I already knew the extraordinary tale of Bouckman, the Jamaican initiate. I had been in the Citadel of La Ferrière, a work without architectural antecedents, foreshadowed only in the Imaginary Prisons of Piranesi. I had breathed the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, a monarch of incredible exploits, far more astonishing than all the cruel kings invented by the Surrealists, so fond of tyrannies of the imaginary variety, although they never had to endure them in reality. At every step I encountered the marvelous in the real. But I also thought that the presence and prevalence of this marvelous reality was not a privilege unique to Haiti, but the patrimony of the whole of America, where there has yet to be drawn up, for example, a complete list of cosmogonies. The fantastic is to be found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates on the history of the Continent and who left names still borne to this day: from those who sought the Fountain of Eternal Youth, from the golden city of Manoa, to the first rebels or the modern heroes of our wars of independence of such mythological stamp as the colonel's wife, Juana de Azurduy. It has always seemed significant to me that, in 1780, some Spanish wise men, setting sail from Angostura, should still embark on a quest for El Dorado, and that, at the time of the French Revolution—long live Reason and the Supreme Being!—Francisco Menendez from Compostela should wander through the lands of Patagonia in search of the Enchanted City of the Caesars.

Considering another aspect of the question, it is clear that, whereas in Western Europe folk dance, for instance, has lost all magical or invocatory character, rare is the collective dance in America that does not incorporate a deep ritualistic meaning, becoming almost a ceremony of initiation: such as the dances of the Cuban santería, or the extraordinary negro version of the festival of Corpus Christi, which can still be seen in the town of San Francisco de Yare, in Venezuela.

§4 There is a moment, in the sixth of the Chants de Maldoror, when the hero, pursued by all the police in the world, escapes from an “army of agents and spies” by adopting the form of different animals and making use of his gift of being able to transport himself in an instant to Peking, Madrid or Saint Petersburg. This is “fantastic literature” at its most uninhibited. But in America, where nothing similar has been written, there existed a Macandal endowed with these same powers by the faith of his contemporaries, and who inspired, with that magic, one of the strangest and most dramatic uprisings in History. Maldoror—Ducasse himself confesses it—was never anything more than a “poetic Rocambole.” His only legacy was a literary school of ephemeral duration. The American Macandal, on the other hand, left behind a whole mythology, along with magical hymns, preserved by an entire people, which are still
sung in Voodoo ceremonies. (There is, besides, a strange coincidence in the fact that Isidore Ducasse, a man who had an exceptional instinct for the fantastic and the poetic, should have been born in America and have boasted, so insistently, at the end of one of his songs, of being “the Montevidean.”) And the point is that, because of its virginal landscape, its formation, its ontology, the Faustian presence of both Indian and Negro, the Revelation represented by its recent discovery, and the fertile interbreeding it has fostered, America is far from having drained its well of mythologies.

¶5 Without any systematic intention on my part, the text that follows is concerned with this sort of preoccupation. In it is narrated a sequence of extraordinary happenings which took place on the island of Santo Domingo, in the space of a period which does not equal the span of a man's life, allowing the marvelous to flow freely from a reality precise in all its details. Because it must be stressed that the ensuing story is based on the most rigorous documentation, which not only respects the historical truth of events, the names of characters—including secondary ones—places and even streets, but which conceals, beneath its apparent intemporality, a meticulous collation of dates and chronologies. And yet, because of the dramatic singularity of the events, the fantastic elegance of the characters encountered at a given moment at the enchanted crossroads of the Ciudad del Cabo, everything seems fabulous in a story impossible to situate in Europe, and which is nonetheless just as real as any exemplary incident consigned, for the purposes of pedagogy, to scholarly textbooks. But what is the history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous in the real?

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175 See Jacque Roumain, *Le sacrifice du Tambour Assoto* [author’s note in original].
APPENDIX B:

TRANSLATION OF FERNANDO ORTIZ’S “‘BRUJOS’ OR ‘SANTEROS’”

This work appears with special tribute to Dr. Fernando Ortiz, founder and president of the Society of Afro-Cuban Studies, who initiated in 1906 this research in Cuba. Since Mr. Rómulo Lachatañeré treats the original work of Fernando Ortiz, Los Negros Brujos, we have asked its author for some notes in relation to the commentary in [Lachatañeré’s] present study, and he has put together for us [nos ha remitido] some appended remarks [acotaciones] that we will publish at the end of [Lachatañeré’s] study with the title “‘Brujos’ or ‘Santeros’” (Director’s note).

¶1 [193] Lachatañeré’s thesis of not accepting the denomination of brujería to signify the religions of Afro-Cubans is really very laudable. As schools of anthropology essentially do not distinguish religion from magic and one and the other continue to be pretty much mixed, it seems unacceptable today that both concepts are confused in such a way. And we have to make an effort to see that the term santería, which is a legitimate and well-formed cubanismo, be accepted to designate the religious systems of Afro-Cubans. But some clarifications seem advisable, above all from a personal point of view. Let us address these first.

¶2 My book Los negros brujos was published in 1906, having been composed by me between 1902 and 1905. Of these years, I spent three in Italy and only one in Havana, where I began my direct research. It is true that, like Dr. Nina Rodrigues had done shortly before in Brazil, I arrived at the ethnographic study of Cuba from the camp of criminal anthropology, with which I had my most fervent attachments. Perhaps some personal memories would not be inopportune.

¶3 In 1901 I finished in Madrid my university degree, which I had begun in 1895 in Havana, my natal city. During my stay of one year in Madrid and at the Sociological Institute organized by Sales y Ferré, we reviewed excitedly the recently published book, La mala vida en Madrid [Criminal Life in Madrid], by Constancio Bernardo de Quirós, the famous criminologist who subsequently, due to the silly vicissitudes of luck, had to leave Spain and can now be found as a professor nearby at the University of Santo Domingo [Dominican Republic]. I was then known in that group of young students for my criminological commitments. [194] My doctoral dissertation, which earned from the Tribunal the singular vote of three highest commendations against two failures, had been on a positivist thesis, and for these reasons obliged me to comment there on Bernardo de Quirós's book and to distinguish its contents from the 'bad life' (la mala vida) in Havana. I felt worried because very little did I know of the tricky affair; but I acquitted myself gracefully by talking of something so exotic there as that which is published in Trujillo Monagas’s work Los criminales de Cuba [The

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176 This translation is my own. The original text appeared as Ortiz 1939. The translation is based on the reprint of the essay (Ortiz 1993a). Bracketed in-text numbers correspond to page breaks in the reprint.
Criminals of Cuba] and that which I had seen in the Madrid museum, Ultramar, where some suits of diablitos, instruments, and the rest of the accessories were kept of the secret societies that had such theatrical fame during the colonial period. But in reality I knew nothing for sure of the ñáñigos, and from that point I proposed to myself to study them and to write a book that would be titled La mala vida en La Habana [Criminal Life in Havana] and to include a chapter on ñáñiguismo as one of its most conspicuous chapters.

¶4 Upon my return to Cuba, I thought that my criminological work would be a thing of a few months; but I soon realized my error. Havana had very peculiar issues in its mala vida, derived from its singular history and from the cultural conglomeration of white, black, and yellow peoples at its base. Facing these difficulties, which would demand a very long time, I joined with two good friends and distinguished writers of those years to write, among the three of us, the projected book. Miguel de Carrón, the fine novelist, was charged with studying the aspects of Havana prostitution, and the acerbic journalist Mario Muñoz Bustamante took charge of the examination of mendicancy. But the book about La mala vida en La Habana, with it attractive title and its alluring content, is still to be written. I offer the theme to any young and daring writing. Those companions died soon thereafter, and through another turn of fortune, I went for a stop in the land of César Lombroso and Enrico Ferri, with some information but without having written a line.

¶5 I had not even initiated the study of the ñáñigos when I came to understand that I would have to separate them from the brujos, as one commonly called them and calls them still. One and the other were confused, and both terms are still scrambled although they are expressive of very different things. And for that reason I continued to gather information for my study of the ñáñigos, and I dedicated myself to substantiating my initial findings about the brujos. (Forty years of labor already have now gone by.)

¶6 In these kinds of religious affairs it is known that every priest believes himself repository of the only certain religion, of ‘the true truth,’ of the Truth with capital ‘T,’ and [considers] heterodox priesthoods wastebaskets of the worst ways, which for [the orthodox] are malicious, inspired by the spirits of evil, by demons, by the numens [nímenes] of enemy tribes, etcetera. For that reason, in the [195] vernacular tongue of Cuba, the black who had any relation with the supernatural would commonly be called brujo, which was the term that was much in vogue in Spain and the Indies since the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, when in the Iberian peninsula there were more witches than those later counted in Afro-American groups. One only has to read the ecclesiastical writings of that period, the proceedings of the Inquisition, the treatises on moral theology, and the literary satires to see how full of brujería Spanish culture was with many of the essential attributes that one says are characteristic of Afro-American brujería, such as the magic, exorcisms, trances, possessions, ecstasies, spells, incantations, orations, amulets, charms, ‘evil eye,’ curses, psalmodies, and dances, up to the sporadic aberrations of cannibalism and necrophilia as well as with other fantastic or lubricious characteristics that never were
known among Negroids, such as flights on brooms, nocturnal Witches’ Sabbaths, Satanic orgies, the freakishness of incubus and succubus creatures, and the prodigious rest in Catholic theory. As non-believers, such white brujerías were piously burned at the stake. Upon being transplanted to the lands of the Americas, the religion of the whites of Castile deemed those who did not take communion as: ‘infidels,’ if they had never been baptized (like the Indians, Moors, and Jews); ‘heretics’ or ‘apostates’ if, having become Christians, they renounced the papacy or accepted whichever other dogma (like the Protestants, Huguenots, Molinists, Jansenists, Illuminists, etc.); and, finally, ‘magicians,’ divided into brujos and hechiceros, if they had a direct treaty with the demons to create supernatural miracles against the mandates of the Church.

¶7 Given the general ignorance of the matter, the term 'brujería' prevailed to signify the magic of blacks, and the word 'hechicería' for the magic of whites. Since then, thousands of poor devils accused as brujos died in the dungeons and the autos de fe of the Santo Oficio because, in 1484—a bit before the discovery of America—Pope Innocent VIII, with his bull Summis desiderantibus affectibus, fulminated on the most terrible canonical penalties and inquisitional persecutions against brujería. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries were precisely when all of Spain was at its fullest with brujos and with demons. Until a king died from a spell. Logically, then, when in the Antilles, before the Sixteenth Century ended, they began to discover certain mysterious rites among black slaves, with strange liturgies and exotic music, and with unintelligible sing-song, the same vocabulary was applied to them as was applied in Spain to those analogous rites persecuted by the Inquisition.

¶8 For the white Catholic, all of the black cults were brujería, an abominable thing inspired by demons for the ruin of human beings. In its expression was that same disdain that, in days gone by, was unanimous among the believers of one African cult against those of another. To the babalao, he who practiced mayombe or kimbisa was a brujo. It is curious to observe how [196] still, among Catholic priests as well as among santeros, those who are not believers in their religion are typically classified as Jews, a word that in those centuries when it was seeping into the language of Cuba was one of the most abominable words in religious matters in every ambit of the Hispanic domain. And the pejorative word continued—and continues— in common use. It does not pertain to a racial prejudice but rather to one of originally ecclesiastical character; but undoubtedly ethnophobias reinforce it and help to maintain it. Therefore, the evident syncretisms of the Catholic with the African cults and the frequent dichotomy that is customarily made in Cuba between certain clergymen and certain blacks of the so-called brujos, when they try to form rites and prayers from one of the popular figures: for example, we could take an oration with the name of Ochún as one dedicated to the Virgin of Charity, which for the mixed masses of Cuba is essentially the same supernatural entity with diverse names.

¶9 Actually, the best treatment that the black and his things will continue to receive, apart from the general cultural expansion making itself known in Cuba, would come from the substitution of the term santería for the word brujería; and this is very plausible because it tends to cast away inexcusable incomprehensions and indecent
diversions. In the end, the term *santería* is a very traditional word that appears in old dictionaries to signify someone devoted to the icons of a superstitious and indiscreet cult. Without a doubt, it was originally applied by those same Spanish clergy to the blacks that in their confraternities [*cabildos*] venerated Mersé, Caridad, or Saint Barbara with unorthodox rites. With the word *santero* one expressed also something ecclesiastically disdainful and indecent in relation to the proper ritual conduct ‘as God mandates’; but in its pejorative sense it did not arrive—not even closely—at the slanderous meaning of the word *brujo*. The *santero* is a mistaken one who adores celestial and good entities; the *brujo* is a pervert who adores infernal and evil entities.

¶10 Upon entering the study of the Afro-Cuban through the path of his typical relations with the supernatural, I adopted for my book the expression, technically and philosophically improper but vernacularly and socially precise; if then it is true that the word expressed confusion, this same confusion is already by itself a social phenomenon that was important to clear up. And later, in the course of my essay I try to go about separating, in the group of so-called *brujos*, the functions of the priest, those of the doctor, and those of the fortune teller, and, after that, the criminal aspects in which at times those activities can manifest; not only those activities strictly of *brujería* or of black magic but rather all of the tendencies of antisocials, such as the false miracle, the capricious *bilongo*, the fraudulent *okpelé*, and illicit healing practices. Realities such as these arise—one cannot deny—among whites and blacks alike because pigmentations have nothing to do with credulities and mischief.

¶11 Today, there is no doubt that at times in the most marginalized sectors of the ancestral traditions there are skeptical or exceedingly gullible subjects, [197] who, by believing in everything or by not believing concretely in anything, sing to Babalú Ayé, light incense to Saint Lazarus, or prepare—for anyone who will pay— a spell to ‘lasso in’ a good catch that acts elusive [*un embrujo para ‘amarrar’ a una Buena moza que se muestra esquiva*]. This occurs in the peripheral zones of all social groups. In validating the example, I can assure that I knew a sacristan of a rural parish church who helped with mass, then ‘threw the shells’ in his house, and on holy occasions climbed to the bell tower to ring the two bells for the procession of the Virgin with the rhythmic *sandungueo* of the falaguera *toque* for the goddess Ochún.

¶12 Thus, all of the magico-religious phenomenology of the black was considered by the white as *brujería*, such that every black priesthood of Africa—whose magic, not being orthodox ‘as God mandates,’ conspires with the spirit of evil—qualifies as ‘dangerous heretics’ to the priests of the subordinating and outsider, or rival, religion. In the same way that, for still more complex reasons but socially analogous, all of the mass of black African slaves, because of the exoticism of all of their customs and languages, was considered by dominating whites as included—*ipso facto*—in the social category of ‘the bad life.’ This is all to say, the life not accepted as good, which is—naturally!—that of the group that is socially predominant and politically and legally coercive. These things can be comprehended more easily today, after forty years of research on Africa and with numerous museums and journals of Afrology now covering the most diverse aspects of black populations. And, above all, the great
awakening of the dispossessed in this twentieth century has diffused greatly the elemental and basic criteria of the social evolution and of the determinism of their factors, which favors objective comprehension. Afro-Cuban Studies has to feel very satisfied that the figure of Rómulo Lachatañeré, already acclaimed for a book treating the folklore of Lucumí mythology in Cuba, would dedicate his efforts to these ethnographic aspects, as much or even more indispensable to the knowledge of the national soul of Cuba than the episodes of the Romencero del Cid or the picaresque life of Rinconete and Cortadillo.
APPENDIX C:
TRANSLATION OF FERNANDO ORTIZ’S “MAGIC AND RELIGION”

¶1 [249] Since the most remote times and in the most primitive cultures, the human being, moved at the same time by fear and hope before the mystery of nature and its forces and by unavoidable contact, has operated by adopting offensive-defensive attitudes that have their own underlying similarities. He has tried to dominate and overcome with force or threat, or by enduring or adapting himself through submission or supplication. Magic is the belief in mysterious powers to which one wants to lay hold through domination, and in order to locate and propitiate them one has to use domineering, compelling, accursed, or conjuring methods. Magic is force and law. Religion is the belief in the mysterious supernatural powers to which one feels bound by subordination, and in order to propitiate and earn favor from them one has to supplicate them through obedient and submissive prayer. Religion is grace and justice.

¶2 The Latin term religio seems to derive from religare, which signifies ‘to bind’ or ‘to tie.’ Generally, one interprets religion as the binding or tying of man as slave to supernatural or divine power, which is the Lord. But Westermarck is of the opinion that in that regard religio was not man bound to God but rather God bound to man.178 Better is to think that the term religio signified a binding of man with superhuman mystery, capable of two expression or attitudes. If man ties the mysterious potency and dominates it, the binding is magic; if he is the bound one, then the binding is religion, more precisely said. That manner of conduct, social or political, that is war among people, with the mysterious, is magic; this other mode, which in interhuman relations is diplomacy, with the mysterious is religion.

¶3 No longer does the opinion seem acceptable of the famous Frazer, for whom magic precedes religion in the development of culture. According to him, at the beginning there is no religion; it is only and everywhere magic. Nor has predominated the theory of P. Schmidt, who takes an inverse perspective; the monotheistic religion was first, through divine revelation, and magic was nothing but a degeneration [250] of the Adamic truth. For Arnold Van Gennep, in his beautiful work Les Ryttes de Passage (1909), magic and religion—the former as practice and the latter as theory—are indissoluble. It does not seem that this is acceptable on account of the distinction between one and the other. There is theory and practice in both; ideas and conceptual systems and also technical matters of doing. In magic, force or mana is in the power of the magician himself, who knows how to marshal and marshals other extrahuman

177 Original source information: Ortiz 1957. All translations are my own. All italicized words appear in bold emphasis in the original text. Bracketed in-text numbers mark the beginning of pages in the original.

178 The original text incorrectly reads “Watermark” instead of “Westermarck.” See n. 169 above for more on this error and on Westermarck.
powers compelled to serve; it is not a matter of simple practice. In religion, sacred power lies in another, superior power to which one supplicates, at times through intermediaries, so that it serves but without making it oblige the supplicant; it is not only theory.

¶4 Still in the religions with present validity, many times the originarily magical concepts coincide and combine with religious ones, particularly in the most archaic, transcendental, and sacramental liturgies; and in general every religious act, including the purest prayer, tends to impregnate itself with magical sentiment by asserting itself as a consequential ‘certainty,’ as if the supernatural powers remain totally obligated to the submissive human act and to the repetition of its words, gestures, and rites. In history, magic and religion frequently appear almost entirely intertwined, simultaneously or alternating. Human progress goes about separating them. Magic continues to transform into science, which is magic already converted into human, truthful, and effective power. Religion goes about converting into philosophy, which is the result of the rationalization of the religious. Yesterday was magic and religion, tomorrow will be science and philosophy.

¶5 It has come to pass that way among blacks as among whites. For the black Congo that we observe in Cuba, nkanga signifies ‘threat’ and its relational functions with the supernatural are inextricably like those of magic as well of religion. In the rest of the Afroid cults of Cuba, those brought from the Sudanese villages of Guinea, the religious rites of propitiation through prayers, sacrifices, dances, possessions, and positive and negative observations are more differentiated from those that are magical, but they consistently combine with them, with rites that are sacramental, divinatory, fetishistic, etc. In that way Plato talked about people that tied up the gods in order to make them fulfill the capturer’s wishes. In the Middle Ages they used to celebrate certain masses called “Masses of the Saintly Spirit,” with profane and harmful objectives, which they believed tied up the will of God Almighty, who had no choice but to do what the celebrants asked of Him. And many who were incredulous of the gods preserved in their conscience a profound and invincible fear of witches. Today, despite the progress of human culture, [251] magic and religion still frequently surface intermingled in a confused magma of heteroclite ideas or in alternating situations or moments.

Havana, July 1956
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