

Write in Tune:
Contemporary Music in Fiction

Edited by Erich Hertz and Jeffrey Roessner

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Static Signals

Celia Cruz, Santería, and Markets of Latinidad in Jennine Capó Crucet's *How to Leave Hialeah*

Elena Machado Sáez

My coauthored book *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* (2007) is primarily about the New York literary scene, but concludes with a tentative exploration of how Cuban American writers trace a continuum between the post-sixties' literary tradition in New York City and Miami-based Latino culture. The present essay expands upon that critical conversation about Latinidad and the market by reading Arlene Dávila's analyses of New York City Latino radio stations alongside Jennine Capó Crucet's short story collection *How to Leave Hialeah* (2009).¹ By specifically addressing Arlene Dávila's concept of "hierarchies of evaluation" within media representations of Latinidad, I aim to show how Cuban American writer Jennine Capó Crucet imagines similar dynamics within a Miami cultural space. Her short story "Resurrection, or: The story behind the Failure of the 2003 Radio Salsa 98.1 Semi-Annual Cuban and/or Puerto Rican Heritage Festival" draws parallels between media definitions of Latinidad and the way the U.S. Latino book market commodifies ethnicity and transmits certain codes of cultural authenticity. In the short story, the dehistoricized figure of Celia Cruz becomes a powerful yet static symbol, to the extent that one of the main characters, Jesenia, believes that resurrecting the recently deceased singer will translate into her own upward mobility out of an unpaid internship at a radio station. In order to historically contextualize Cruz in terms of her self-fashioning as a Latino icon, I refer to her autobiography, *My Life: Celia* (2004), and videos of her performances, while also engaging the work of Frances Negrón-Mutaner and María del Carmen Martínez, who analyze the critical reception of Cruz's iconicity. By historicizing Cruz's translation from Cuban performer to pan-Latino celebrity, I discuss how Capó Crucet deploys the singer and Santería as cultural indexes in order to allegorize the challenges of representation and cultural authenticity for U.S. Latino writers. The story's nameless narrator and her constant allusions to the reader's expectations link Jesenia's misguided efforts at upward mobility to a broader context of the short story's own participation in the market for U.S. Latino cultural production.

Latinidad and Hierarchies of Evaluation

Since the title of Capó Crucet's short story centers on a Miami radio station, I begin with Arlene Dávila's discussion of a similar salsa music station, La Mega, in New York City. In "Talking Back: Spanish Media and U.S. Latinidad" (2002), Dávila analyzes La Mega within the broader context of "Spanish and Latino-oriented media [that] have undoubtedly contributed to Latinization," which she defines as "the consolidation of a common Latino identity among different Latino subgroups."² Part of what interests Dávila is that such media not only constructs a pan-Latino identity, but the process of Latinization entails the "forg[ing] and trigger[ing] of existing hierarchies of evaluation among members of ostensibly the same group" (Dávila, 27). What this means is that even when Latinidad is invoked within Spanish-language media, specific subgroups are assigned varying degrees of belonging and these hierarchies reinforce dominant stereotypes about each Latino subgroup. The result being that, as Dávila states, each Latino subgroup is reduced "to a particular cultural index, be it music, race, or an artist" (Dávila, 29).

In her ethnographic research with various focus groups, Dávila found that in conversations regarding the radio station, La Mega, her Latino subjects often adopted the media's "associat[ion] of nationalities with particular ethnic indexes" (Dávila, 29). The focus group participants would deploy the media's hierarchies of evaluation in order to situate themselves in opposition to Other Latino groups. For example, Dávila found that "people's negative comments on La Mega did not necessarily reflect their listening habits, but rather their generalized association of salsa/merengue stations with Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, who in these discussions were treated as the embodiments of low culture against which other New York Latinos would distinguish themselves as more moral, respectable, and authentic" (Dávila, 32). The disparaging remarks made about the radio station did not necessarily mean that the participants did not enjoy listening to the music played on La Mega. Instead, participants appeared to achieve a cultural upward mobility by contrasting themselves with the cultural indexes of salsa and merengue and the Latino groups associated with these musical genres. Dávila notes that, "while all groups admitted liking and listening to La Mega, it was common for people to make claims about their status and class for themselves and others by shunning or taking issue with the station's vulgar and offensive content, or else by being more or less open about their listening to this station" (Dávila, 32). Assigning vulgarity to Puerto Rican and Dominican communities is shown by Dávila to work as a positioning device by other Latinos to symbolically move up the hierarchy of Latinidad.

Jesenia's Upward Mobility Project

These desires for upward mobility are also tied to media representation in Jennine Capó Crucet's short story. Jesenia, the main character, whose Latinidad is implied but never specified in terms of ethnic group, comes to believe in the power of popular

culture as an avenue for upward mobility, converted to this idea while dancing (high) at a club to the remix of Celia Cruz's "La Negra Tiene Tumbao." This song was Cruz's last big hit before she died in the July of 2003, and blends together the genres of hip hop, reggaeton, and salsa. Dancing, Jesenia is physically overcome by the music:

The trumpets in the song match up perfect with the lights trailing like a freaked-out rainbow, and I'm so happy I start thinking I might fall down, and then it comes to me—and it's hard to hold onto stuff when you're rolling, so I know God wants this—that this happiness is something everyone has to feel.³

Jesenia sees the song accentuating a rainbow diversity that provides access to the happiness of true belonging, but she also interprets media representation as tandem to economic assimilation. Resurrecting Cruz would not only give "everyone" access to that same feeling of happiness, but Jesenia hopes to change her own class status as "an intern who does not get paid, [and] was put in semi-charge of organizing" the "Radio Salsa 98.1 Semi-Annual Cuban and/or Puerto Rican Heritage Festival" (Capó Crucet, 5). As you might imagine; Jesenia's project of obtaining a promotion by "bring[ing] Celia Cruz back from the dead to do one last concert" fails miserably (Capó Crucet, 8). This project fails on the global scale (neither the nun nor the santera she visits help Jesenia resurrect Cruz) as well as the local scale (after accepting defeat at the end of the story, Jesenia also misses out on a potential hookup on a street corner with a guy from the "Beautiful South Beach Weekend Elite") (Capó Crucet, 10). Similarly to the club scene, Jesenia is dancing on the street corner, seduced by the bass beat from the car stopped at the light. However, that same music serves as the static that prevents Jesenia from connecting with the driver, a potential romantic partner who could offer Jesenia access to the upper-class life she seeks.

Overall, the story gives little indication of Celia Cruz's significance aside from that dance club scene that Jesenia describes. The reader is only given two historical referents: that the story is set in Miami in 2003 and that Cruz has "only been dead a couple of months" (Capó Crucet, 5), which provides the rationale for Jesenia's plan for resurrection—"I think if we pray hard enough it can happen" (Capó Crucet, 5). The symbolic power that Jesenia ascribes to Cruz is so static that she cannot imagine that even death would have changed the singer. Mentions in the story are made of the singer's *Greatest Hits* album and "La Negra Tiene Tumbao," but they remain unexplored and marginal as one-dimensional references. In order to explore the implications of the short story's static and dehistoricized image of Celia Cruz, I turn to Frances Negrón-Mutaner's essay, "Celia's Shoes" (2007), Cruz's autobiography, and two of her musical performances. The story does not question Jesenia's choice of Cruz as her patron saint of upward mobility; however, reviewing the contemporary critiques of Cruz's status as cultural representative helps us understand the implications of Jesenia's resurrection mission. Examining why and how Cruz transformed herself into a pan-Latino musical icon complicates the symbolism of her larger-than-life status in the story.

Celia Cruz in Translation

The short story's idealized and dehistoricized image of Celia Cruz stands in contrast to the conflicting responses within the Cuban American community to Cruz as a representative of the Cuban exile experience. The tension over Cruz's authenticity as a Cuban exile derives from similar questions of race, gender, and high versus low culture discussed by Dávila's focus groups. To begin, while the story frames the singer as a static symbol for Miami Latino/as, Cruz's narrative of migration does not follow the Miami trajectory of Cuban exile. As Negrón-Mutaner points out, "Celia responded dramatically to the Cuban Revolution's swift restructuring of the entertainment industry in 1959" by "first mov[ing] to Mexico and then settl[ing] permanently outside New York City."⁴ In examining the process by which this "self-described 'ugly woman' became a pan-Latino icon" (Negrón-Mutaner, 96), Negrón-Mutaner also exposes the conflicting responses within the Cuban American community to Cruz as a representative of the Cuban exile experience. She describes a conversation with a former Cuban ambassador who angrily contests Cruz's iconicity; specifically, the inclusion of her shoes as "part of the permanent collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History" (Negrón-Mutaner, 95). The ambassador "held the deepest contempt for what he called the Smithsonian's 'pedestrian' taste" and "insist[ed] that the museum's exhibition of Celia's finery was a way of humiliating Cuban exiles in the United States" (Negrón-Mutaner, 96). This Cuban exile very clearly sees Celia Cruz at the bottom of his hierarchy of evaluation, asking, "Couldn't the Smithsonian choose something more elevated to represent the Cuban people? A poem by patriot José Martí? A portrait of Father Varela, the nineteenth-century priest called 'the first Cuban'? A uniform worn by pro-independence fighter Antonio Maceo?" (Negrón-Mutaner, 96). Dávila's discussion of media representation is indirectly evoked here by Negrón-Mutaner: "[T]he Cuban diplomat did see one thing straight: the display of the singer's worn shoes as representative of all Cuban exile experience in the United States references the lowliest of signs according to elite cultural hierarchies" (Negrón-Mutaner, 96). Cruz troubles the normative hierarchies of Cuban American identity in the mainstream media, not only due to her racial and geographic distance from the dominant stereotype of Cubans in the USA, but also her musical and political associations. An outspoken critic of the Castro regime, she also vocally defended the rights of undocumented immigrants in the United States (for example, her public statements in opposition to the 1995 bill, Prop 187, in California).⁵

Most importantly for the purposes of analyzing Jennine Capó Crucet's short story, Celia Cruz's career entailed a shift from an early identification as a Cuban music singer to her transformation into a pan-Latino music icon. Negrón-Mutaner describes this particular element of Cruz's trajectory by arguing that exile:

... provided the conditions for her to ascend professionally from the genre-specific and nationally bound musical identity as *la guarachera de Cuba* to a pan-Latino global identification as the Queen of Salsa. ... [S]he had little trouble incorporating the new accents that came to define "Latin" music for over the past half-century.

(Negrón-Mutaner, 97)

Cruz's ability to expand her musical repertoire beyond her Cuban musical training can be credited to her self-styling in terms of music and fashion. By discussing videos of Cruz's performances, we can visualize Cruz's transition from Cuban *guarachera* to her incarnation of pan-Latinidad.⁶ The static symbol of Celia Cruz in Capó Crucet's short story can be fleshed out through a discussion of Cruz's musical career and its trajectory. In her autobiography, *Celia: My Life* (2004), Cruz explains that, "from 1967 until 1969, we worked seven months a year in Mexico."⁷ During this time, Cruz gave a televised performance of the unofficial Cuban anthem "Guantanamera." Dressed in an elegant, fitted dress, with her hair perfectly gathered in a bun, Cruz can be seen dancing a *guaracha* while wearing those famous shoes that are now part of the Smithsonian collection. Ironically echoing the words of the Cuban ambassador who criticized the exhibition of her shoes, Cruz improvises and adds her own verses to the song's usual lyrics, mentioning the "verbo de Martí" and the "machete de Maceo"⁸ Cruz lays claim to her Cubanness by using the same cultural icons that the ambassador deemed more worthy of representing the Cuban nation. While she is concluding her performance, the curtain is pulled up to reveal a group of white teenagers, dressed in 1960s mod clothing. Their awkwardness during Cruz's final lines, unsure as to whether and how they should sway along to the music, speaks to a major challenge that the performer would soon encounter in her career. In her autobiography, Cruz explains that:

... the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s was the age of rock and disco, and, as a result, my people's music was barely played. ... Many believed that Cuban music was something of the past and that it belonged only in the homes of Cuban exiles and at dances for older people. In other words, Cuban music just wasn't hip.

(Cruz and Reymundo, 129)

Because "young people were snubbing the classification of traditional Cuban music" (Cruz and Reymundo, 132), Cruz argues that it became necessary to create a new label for these musical rhythms in order to market them to a new generation. She gives the example that, when performing in Miami during the 1960s and 1970s, "if we called our performance 'salsa,' 80 percent of the audience would be composed of young people. If we called it a Cuban musical performance, young people would ignore it" (Cruz and Reymundo, 132).

Cruz's self-transformation into the Queen of Salsa entailed a very specific strategy to address this problem of popularity: the adoption of a musical pan-Latinidad. When "asked what my secret is and why my songs become so popular" (Cruz and Reymundo, 137), Cruz points to her choice of musical arrangements:

When we pick what we are going to record on an album, we make sure to have a *bomba* for the Puerto Ricans, a *guaracha* for the Cubans, a *merengue* for the Dominicans, and so on, since people like to hear songs recorded in their native styles.

(Cruz and Reymundo, 139)

The integration of different Latin musical styles in her last big hit, “La Negra Tiene Tumbao” (2001), from salsa to reggaeton, is emblematic of the survival strategy Cruz developed in order to ensure her continued relevance and appeal to young Latino audiences. The awarding of the Grammy for Best Salsa Record in 2003, in a large part due to this song, speaks to Cruz’s market success as well as to her ability to identify new trends such as reggaeton, for which the mainstream music industry had no category at the time. The music video for the song also reflects a visual imaginary of pan-Latinidad.⁹ Unlike the 1967 televised performance, Celia Cruz is not the sole figure depicted in the music video. The video’s narrative follows the journey of a tall, thin, beautiful black woman who walks into a Laundromat wearing a miniskirt, black bra, and white fur coat and proceeds to strip in front of a multicultural cast of characters, male and female, black and white, whose gaze of desire parallels that of the camera. The tone of this video, however, is largely comedic and playful, with Cruz herself embodying a rainbow diversity with continual changes in wardrobe and wigs. The lyrics of the song are significant for its symbolism in Capó Crucet’s short story. One of the last lines in the video has Cruz singing that, after people die, they are often remembered in an idealistic manner (“era tan buena”), and that she prefers to have the truth be told, that she enjoyed life, while taking precautions (“Celia Cruz—La Negra Tiene Tumbao”). So, this theme of memory, the way a person is memorialized after death, figures very strongly in Jesenia’s resurrection project. Jesenia’s idealization of Cruz finds its expression in her belief that the singer’s embodiment of pan-ethnic musical diversity will resolve Jesenia’s problem of economic inequality as an unpaid intern.

With such complicated contexts in mind, of community reception, exile, and musical migrations, what would it then mean for Jesenia to raise Celia Cruz from the dead? We would probably have to start with what her death in 2003 meant to the Cuban American community in Miami. Negrón-Mutaner helpfully points out that, “if New York was to be the final resting place in lieu of Cuba, Miami was the showcase, the surface on which Cubans contemplated the state of their national selves” (Negrón-Mutaner, 110). If “no other event of [Cruz’s] public life brought to light so many tensions between Cubans as her funeral” (Negrón-Mutaner, 109), then it seems that Jesenia’s plans for resurrection can be read as an attempt to erase these divisions, to resolve the fragmentation of the Cuban exile community, in the interest of reinstating Latinization through the figure of Cruz, of reaffirming a pan-Latino unity through popular culture and the media. Jesenia believes that resurrecting the singer will help her successfully fulfill her responsibility at the radio station as the semi-organizer of a pan-Latino cultural event, the “Cuban and/or Puerto Rican Heritage Festival.” Part of the mystical power that Jesenia ascribes to Cruz performing another concert is that of resolving the tension in the “and/or” that links and divides these two different Latino communities. The failure of Jesenia’s project can then be understood as Jennine Capó Crucet’s commentary on the inability of the media market to gloss over the ethnic, cultural, and political diversity of the U.S. Latino community. But, even if this is the case, what does it mean for the short story to depict Celia Cruz as a floating signifier, completely detached from her historicity?

Teasing the Reader, Teasing out the Implications of the Market

The static quality of Celia Cruz’s depiction in the story as either background music or a ghostly promise of market success mirrors the evocation of the reader’s presence as a figure haunting the narration of Jesenia’s story. By using the nameless narrator to invoke and revoke the imagined reader’s powers of interpretation, Capó Crucet points to the complicity of the English literary market as engaged in the same Latinization process as that of Spanish-language media, and therefore equally dependent upon reducing diversity to “iconic and essentialist representations that are presented as ‘belonging’ neatly to some groups and not to others” (Dávila, 29). What Jennine Capó Crucet’s short story resurrects and makes visible is the hierarchy of evaluation employed by the reader, and here I mean that the narration of the story highlights the process by which the reader domesticates the narrative according to the ethnic indexes they bring to U.S. Latino fiction. The numerous narrative asides to the reader acknowledge the reader’s desire for, and, by extension, the market appeal of, representation and authenticity. These second-person asides reference the “you” of the reader and the interpretive lens that the audience will apply to the short story. I’d therefore like to close this essay by exploring the ways that the narrative feeds into and forecloses the reader’s voyeuristic desire for knowledge about the ethnic Other.

The short story’s opening implies that the reader’s imagination will be the dominant force shaping the plot: “You could imagine the sound of the soft soles of her shoes scuffing down the center aisle. . . . Or you could imagine that someone has just finished playing an organ. . . . You could imagine the church’s entire frame rattling from the distant boom of the bass beat at a nearby dance club. Any of these would work fine” (Capó Crucet, 1). Of course, while the narrator reassures the reader that any of these alternatives will be acceptable, opening up the story to different soundtrack possibilities, the narrator reinscribes her authority, establishing which alternatives have the opportunity to become conclusive. It is the narrator who provides this list of which sounds would “work fine” with the beginning of story. The reassurances in these first lines imply a power struggle over narration, but the story proceeds to place the reader on the higher end of a hierarchy of knowledge. While Jesenia is depicted as a clueless girl on a hopeless mission, the reader is at first aligned with the more worldly character of the nun, Marcela. For example, as Jesenia attempts to explain her resurrection project to Marcela in church, the narrator explains that, “This is how these pookie-heads talk; you know that; even the nun knows that” (Capó Crucet, 4). The authority of the reader is therefore tied to his or her ability to judge the authenticity of the characters’ thoughts and actions.

As the story progresses, several obstacles emerge to challenge the reader’s power of interpretation and hierarchy of evaluation. When Jesenia goes to see the nun’s sister, Ocila the santera, for help with Celia Cruz’s resurrection, the narrator transitions from a declarative sentence about the surprising normalcy of the santera’s house into an analysis of how the reader will resolve this “problem”:

You could say the room, even the whole townhouse, seems more regular than any room in any townhouse you had ever seen, except for the oddly placed table and

its little frame, and a jar full of pennies and feathers on the floor propping open the bedroom door. So you reason that maybe santeras don't necessarily like advertising their religious affiliations through their home décor.

(Capó Crucet, 7)

The reader's expectations are aligned with stereotypes of Santería practitioners such that the normalcy of this regular home must be explained away by imagining that Santería markets its practices in more secretive ways. Since the narrative frames the non-stereotypical styling of Ocila's home as a disguise, the imagined reader's rationalization of normalcy as a camouflage for an exotic religious practice alludes to the market reader's desire to trespass into an underworld of authentic Latino subculture.

Jesenia's visit to Ocila, the santera, is a climactic scene where the interpretive confrontation between the reader and narrator is most explicitly staged. The progression of the story has been structured as a sort of scavenger hunt, with the reader aligned with Jesenia in the search of a marginalized but authentic route for recuperating the icon of Latinidad, Celia Cruz. Not coincidentally, the figure of Cruz reemerges in this scene as background music to a cultural practice that will hopefully result in the same effect as Jesenia's dance floor conversion—true belonging will finally be achieved. Instead, the reader and Jesenia's desires are halted, and, in the process, the narrator "calls out" the reader for the ethnic indexes applied to Santería. As a result, it also becomes clear that the role of the narrator is equally conscripted by market forces. As Ocila begins the ceremony to resurrect the singer, the narrative reenacts the interpretive game that opened the story:

What happens next is up to you because it relies on your knowledge of Santería. Maybe Ocila mashes the flowers into a paste and smears it on Jesenia's upper lip while playing *Celia Cruz's Greatest Hits* on a loop. Maybe she makes a powder that Jesenia must then sprinkle over both Celia's grave and the stage where she wants her to perform. Maybe she spreads chicken feathers on the ground and has Jesenia lay out on them while Ocila douses her with sugar water.

(Capó Crucet, 9)

Now, the plot possibilities depend on the reader's knowledge of not just Santería but the not very accessible location of Cruz's gravesite in the Bronx (considering that Jesenia is in Miami). The ahistorical rendering of Cruz and Santería ensure that these options can only be evaluated according to the "cultural authenticity" of the reader, such that the story forces the reader into a hierarchy of evaluation.

The narrator assumes that the reader is unable to evaluate which of these options is the most realistic ceremony:

The point is, barring your own attempts at research—and you know how lazy you can be, how else do you find the time to read stuff like this?—you need to be *told*, preferably by someone you'd consider an expert, an insider. Someone who knows enough to drop the name *Changó* (a.k.a. Santa Bárbara) or *Babalu-aye*

(a.k.a. San Lázaro) in the same way Ocila does to give her act credibility in front of Jesenia.

(Capó Crucet, 9)

The narrator "knows enough" to translate certain Santería terminology; however, right after the narrator situates the reader as a cultural outsider, the narrator proceeds to admit to her *own* lack of knowledge about Santería. Since the reader and the narrator are shown to be cultural outsiders informed by similar hierarchies of evaluation, the undermining of the reader's knowledge is mirrored by the narrator's self-deconstruction:

Maybe your narrator—me—then tells you about the santeros that lived across the street from my childhood home. How one morning, I woke up to find our entire driveway covered in pennies. I tell you how my mother made us all—my father, my grandmother, my two sisters, and my younger brother—pee in a bucket so Mom could pour it over the pennies and sweep them out into the street to undo the *trabajo* they'd done on our house for only Changó knows what reason. I might admit that that's pretty much the extent of my firsthand experience with Santería. Your narrator, however, thanks God for such ignorance.

(Capó Crucet, 9)

On the one hand, this passage highlights the power dynamics shaping the ethnic writer as an authentic translator and undermines the lazy market reader's expectation by confessing to a lack of knowledge about the cultural index of Santería. On the other hand, the narrator's confession also serves to contrast the narrator's family with the santeros across the street. In the same way that Dávila's focus groups position themselves higher up on the Latino social ladder by denigrating the morality of the radio station La Mega, the narrator uses the cultural index of Santería to thankfully move up the cultural scale of Latinidad, claiming ignorance of such "pedestrian" cultural practices. Pulling back the curtain of cultural authority and knowledge, the reader and narrator are both shown to operate according to the Spanish and English media's stereotyped cultural indexes.

The narrator imagines the effect of admitting to cultural ignorance on the reader:

But what kind of story would such a confession leave you with? Not the one you expected—you wanted chicken blood, people wearing burlap, goats maybe, statues eating fruit and drinking bottles of beer. You want zombies. And Jesenia—she just wants something real to happen, and she fools herself weekend after weekend into thinking that she is a VIP. She just wants to forget that she can't stay behind the velvet rope come Monday morning. But here's what happens.

(Capó Crucet, 9)

The reader and Jesenia's desires for "something real to happen" are exposed as culturally constructed. Both want zombies, the living dead, to appear; both want the static ideology of stereotype to stand in for the dynamic and paradoxical diversity of living culture. As "professional knowers," their shared interest lies in accessing the

authentic and real, which, in the story, turns out to be an unattainable illusion.¹⁰ Defrauded, the narrator and Jesenia are reduced to the same position of frustrated desire: “[Jesenia] realizes—just as you are reading this—that Ocila really can’t do what she claims to do for a living; she can’t conjure spirits, she can’t convince you to believe in something you don’t trust” (Capó Crucet, 9–10). Despite the narrator’s desires for upward mobility and attempts to distinguish herself as more respectable than those santeros across the street, the narrator becomes aligned with the santera. Both the narrator and Ocila are revealed as posers, as unable to meet the “real” demands of their customers.¹¹ The last line of the story, “And you, you keep watching [Jesenia], hardly believing people like this exist” (Capó Crucet, 10), affirms that Ocila and the narrator’s performances have been shattered, such that the imagined reader is left in a state of disbelief regarding the story’s claim to realism.

The Santera Who Lived on Celia Cruz’s Street

The allegorization of the narrative’s anxieties over representation and cultural authenticity through the depiction of Santería brings us back to the static symbol of Celia Cruz. While Cruz transformed herself into a pan-Latino icon, her identity as an Afro-Cuban had a double valence within exile discourse of Cubanidad. As María del Carmen Martínez notes in “Mambisa y (Mala) Madre: The Mulata and Cuban American Literature” (2007), Cruz was often depicted during her lifetime as “both race-less and the quintessential representative of Cuban color.”¹² In her autobiography, Cruz discusses the racial stereotypes imposed upon her due to her status as a spokesperson for Afro-Cubans, saying that “Many people who don’t know me well think that I’m a *santera*. I’m black and Cuban, so, naturally, I must believe in Santería” (Cruz and Reymundo, 24–5). Cruz calls attention to how her identity, in the words of Dávila, is reduced “to a particular cultural index,” that of Santería (Dávila, 19). She recounts that such stereotypes of Afro-Cubanness have led to some awkward situations; for example, when a man in the Dominican Republic insisted that he and Cruz “were both initiated into Santería together” or when a “young Cuban man accompanied by two pregnant women” in Miami asked Cruz to bless the unborn children in her supposed capacity as a santera (Cruz and Reymundo, 25). Capó Crucet’s fictional character of Jesenia and her seemingly irrational investment in the mystical power of Cruz’s music actually echoes a public discourse that typecasts Cruz as having supernatural powers due to her nationality and race.

In order to refute her depiction as a stereotypical Afro-Cuban santera, Cruz tells the story of how “right behind my house lived a *santera* named Chela” (Cruz and Reymundo, 23). Emphasizing that her “mother was always frightened by Santería and the *santeros*” (Cruz and Reymundo, 23), Cruz recounts a childhood memory of a transformative encounter with Chela’s religious practice:

One dreadfully warm afternoon, when I couldn’t stand being locked in the house anymore, I wanted to go out back and get some fresh air, but I was afraid to, since

Chela was getting ready for one of her *bembés*. But the heat and my boredom conquered my fear. I went out and sat under the kapok tree that grew in the corner of the backyard, and, through the back corridor that linked all the houses, I could clearly hear the neighbors. I was frightened when I heard the beat of those drums and the songs. . . . Still, the music called out to me.

(Cruz and Reymundo, 24)

Hearing the beats and rhythms that flowed through the shared communal space of the backyard, Cruz finds herself moved by the music of Santería. In contrast to the narrator of Capó Crucet’s short story, Cruz does not counter the stereotype of Afro-Cubanness by claiming thankful ignorance of Santería’s practices. Instead, Cruz explains how the liturgical music of Santería helped her overcome her apprehension about a religion she knew very little about:

That I sat there listening to the music surprised even me, since I have to admit that the first time I heard those songs and drums I ran and hid, especially when I saw how much those rituals frightened my mother. But with the passage of time, I began to appreciate that type of music as a beautiful way of expressing my African roots.

(Cruz and Reymundo, 24)

Laying claim to the cultural heritage of Santería music, to its beautiful rhythms, she rejects the hierarchy of evaluation that flattens out the complexities of Santería.

Cruz distinguishes between appreciation of Santería and devotion to its spiritual beliefs, explaining that, while its music provided inspiration for her career, the influence did not correspond with an adoption of Santería as a religious practice. Cruz provides the example that she “even developed a good Lucumi pronunciation, although [she] never learned what the words meant” (Cruz and Reymundo, 24). Since Cruz describes herself as “somewhat versed” in Santería’s language (Cruz and Reymundo, 25), she argues that this albeit “superficial” (Cruz and Reymundo, 26) knowledge enables her to “respect all belief systems and all religions, including Santería” (Cruz and Reymundo, 25). Cruz’s story about the santera who lived behind her childhood home in Havana stands in stark contrast to the narrator’s version of the santeros who lived across the street. Reviewing Cruz’s association with Santería enables another layer of analysis for Capó Crucet’s story—Latinidad’s sublimation of race as well as the colorblind regime that often occludes racism in U.S. society and culture. The narrator’s depiction of Jesenia’s journey relies on an acceptance of Celia Cruz’s symbolism as a figure of the supernatural, seamlessly connecting the worlds of the dance club, the church, and the santera’s home. As previously noted, Cruz observes that, “many people insist on classifying me as a *santera* . . . due to their prejudices, since I am *both* black and Cuban” (Cruz and Reymundo, 24–5). The narrator’s invocation of the singer as a static symbol entails silencing or rendering invisible essentialist notions of race. Recalling María del Carmen Martínez’s analysis of Cruz’s contradictory embodiment of Cubanidad as both a “race-less” performer and “quintessential” Afro-Cuban, the story explores the

consequences of obviating race. None of the characters—Jesenia, Marcela the nun, Ocala the santera, or even the santeros across the street from the narrator's childhood home—are identified racially or ethnically. By erasing the story of these codes of identity, Jennine Capó Crucet aligns the market value of pan-Latinidad with the absencing of historical contexts. The narrator's self-conscious unraveling in relation to cultural authenticity means that her performance of pan-Latinidad ultimately is fractured by the effort to purge histories of racial inequality and stereotype from the story. Celia Cruz's ghostly presence embodies the various contexts that have been silenced and yet continue to haunt the narration of this Latino narrative.

Through the depiction of Celia Cruz as a race-less and static symbol within a larger system of cultural indexes for Cuban American culture such as Santería, Jennine Capó Crucet's short story helps us make connections between media cultural hierarchies in Miami and New York City while also opening up a conversation about how the U.S. Latino book market commodifies cultural authenticity and shapes reading practices. Cruz's music videos and autobiographical writing contextualize and frame Capó Crucet's depiction of the market's reduction of diversity with a static Cruz, frozen in time. The invocation of Cruz and Santería point to the coexistence of pan-ethnicity and hierarchies of evaluation, such that the privileging of some forms of culture over others pits groups of presumably the same ethnicity against one another. "The story behind the Failure of the 2003 Radio Salsa 98.1 Semi-Annual Cuban and/or Puerto Rican Heritage Festival" exposes how cultural indexes shape the production and the interpretation of Latino writing, and Jesenia's story functions as an allegory for the relationship between a Latino text and its market audience.

Notes

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- 1 I define Latinidad as a pan-ethnic construction of U.S. Latino/a identity and culture. In this essay, I focus on how media and popular culture shape the definition of Latinidad; for a more in-depth analysis of the concept, see Marta Caminero-Santangelo's *On Latinidad*.
- 2 Dávila, "Talking Back," 27.
- 3 Capó Crucet, "Resurrection, or: The story behind the Failure of the 2003 Radio Salsa 98.1 Semi-Annual Cuban and/or Puerto Rican Heritage Festival," 4–5.
- 4 Negrón-Mutaner, "Celia's Shoes," 97.
- 5 In her autobiography, Cruz notes that she "made [her] position on this issue very public" (Cruz and Reymundo, 185). She also explains that her own experience as an "undocumented immigrant" informs her opposition to "children being denied basic human rights, like the right to an education," simply because "they lack a bureaucratic

piece of paper" (Cruz and Reymundo, 185). That is not to say that Cruz did not often espouse radical Cuban exile politics. For example, she was known for her unyielding refusal to perform with musicians from Cuba. This stance upset certain segments of her fans; for example, see Chapter 16 of Eduardo Marceles's biography of the singer, *Azucar!*, which describes a 1997 incident in Puerto Rico when Cruz was booed off the stage at a salsa music festival.

- 6 "Guarachera" refers to a singer of the guaracha, a genre of Cuban popular music that has binary rhythms and a rapid tempo. Additionally, the title of guarachero or guarachera refers to those performers who are expert improvisers.
- 7 Cruz and Reymundo, *Celia: My Life*, 133.
- 8 "Celia Cruz—Guantanamera."
- 9 "Celia Cruz—La Negra Tiene Tumbao."
- 10 I borrow the term of "professional knowers" from David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*, 28.
- 11 For a more in-depth discussion of how the demands for autobiographical realism and cultural authenticity have shaped American popular music in the 20th century, see *Faking It* by Barker and Taylor. Their chapter on the album *Buena Vista Social Club* provides a useful point of comparison to Celia Cruz's musical career by analyzing Ry Cooder's successful translation of Cuban music into the relatively new marketing category of world music.
- 12 Martínez, "Mambisa y (Mala) Madre," 231.

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