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by

Iliyana Hadjistoyanova

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**“Under the glorious inter-American flag of New York”: Club Cubano
Interamericano and the process of Cuban American community formation in
New York City in the early 20th century**

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: _____
Frank Guridy

Jossianna Arroyo-Martinez

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Iliyana Hadjistoyanova, B.A.

Report

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**“Under the glorious inter-American flag of New York”: Club Cubano
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Iliyana Hadjistoyanova, MA
The University of Texas at Austin, 2013
SUPERVISOR: Frank Guridy

This report explores Club Cubano Inter-Americano’s history in order to show how it helped situate Cuban immigrants within the Anglo and Latino communities in New York City in the early 20th century, and it examines the ways in which immigrants balanced their island heritage with community building in the United States. The different parts of the report focus on the organization’s foundation, leadership, activities, events, and treatment of race. A historiography of similar social groups provides a necessary background of the overall structure and goals of Cuban mutual-aid societies. Although the question of race was never officially present in Club-related rhetoric, a number of similarities link its makeup and functions to an existing tradition of Afro-Cuban mutual-aid societies on the island and abroad. The analysis of the New York Club Cubano Inter-Americano provides a glimpse into a part of the Cuban migration in the United States that simply does not fit with the rest.

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Introduction: ¿Qué pasa, U.S.A.?

“I’ve been here most of my life, so I feel pretty American ... but then I also feel very Cuban.”¹ This is a line from the hit bilingual TV show *¿Qué pasa, U.S.A.?*, which first aired in 1975. The show details the story of a Cuban-American family living in Miami after fleeing the Castro regime shortly following the 1959 revolution. The quote deftly captures the quandary that had consistently perplexed migrants from the island throughout the 19th and 20th century: How did Cubans self-identify in their experience in the United States, and how did they fit in within US society but also with regard to other Latinos living here?

This thesis will attempt to answer these questions by looking at the experience of Cuban Americans living in New York City in the early 20th century through the lens of Club Cubano Interamericano (CCI), a social organization for Cubans living in the city that was established in 1946. I argue that the process of Cuban American community formation during that period was threefold. First, immigrants sought to preserve their *cubandíad*, or sense of Cuban cultural heritage. Second, they strove to forge relationships with other Latinos in the city in the hope of finding common ground and working together to achieve a variety of shared goals. Finally, these Cubans found it important to really become full-fledged members of US society. Many of them had decided to make the United States their new home, and becoming U.S. American, both politically and culturally, was a vital part of that adjustment. Scholar Agustín Laó-Montes suggests that this new

¹ *¿Qué pasa, U.S.A.?* episode no. 11.

relationship “of domination, resistance, and transculturation” between the United States and immigrants has caused the formation of what he refers to as “border zones for cultural production and political struggles.”² What immediately comes to mind here is Gloria Anzaldúa’s metaphor of the borderland as a space where multifaceted identities are negotiated. Coming to the United States, Cubans at the time faced the difficult task of juggling between at least three identities. However, following Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper’s suggestion, it seems more appropriate in this case to approach identity as a category of practice than a category of analysis. Situating Cuban American identity formation in the narrative of everyday experiences and activities allows for the construction of identity as an “active” process, driven by the people, and not vice versa.³

The meaning of being “Cuban” is in many ways determined by the long-standing intimate relationship between the United States and Cuba. Starting with the Monroe Doctrine, the US declared its interest in being involved in Latin America and the Caribbean since early 19th century. Its subsequent participation in the Spanish-American War fortified once and for all American involvement in the island’s domestic and foreign affairs. Furthermore, the Platt Amendment of 1901 and Theodore Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine of 1904 confirmed the country’s commitment to a long-lasting presence in the region. César Ayala’s work on the transformation of the Caribbean economies as a result of the expanding US

² Agustín Laó-Montes, "Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City," 33.

³ Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'identity,'" 3.

influence in the region indicates that the relationship between the States and Cuba (as well Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic) proved especially intimate due to the considerable economic interest that the northern hegemon had vested into the island's sugar industry.⁴ Taking advantage of the favorable local tax policies, Americans in the early 20th century operated a number of businesses in Cuba, or as Louis A. Pérez puts it, "North Americans integrated themselves at all levels of the Cuban economy."⁵ They also owned residential property and often vacationed there, with locals aware of the economic advantages that that relationship provided and catering to the needs of investors and visitors. Historian María Cristina García reveals, however, that the flow of people, capital, goods, and culture was definitely two-sided. Cubans, too, enjoyed vacationing in the United States, and many had holiday homes in Southern Florida. The loved baseball and enjoyed American music and movies. As Pérez, suggests, the relationship between Cuba and the States swiftly replaced the colonial interaction between the island and Spain.⁶ Thus, it was only natural that in times of political or economic hardship, Cubans sought the refuge in the comforting familiarity of the United States.⁷

Throughout the 19th and 20th century New York has been growing at an unimaginable rate, and its ever-expanding economy was providing job

⁴ Cesar Ayala. *American Sugar Kingdom: The Plantation Economy of the Spanish Caribbean, 1898-1934*, 1-6.

⁵ Louis Pérez. A. *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture*, 20.

⁶ Ibid, 16-24.

⁷ María Cristina García, *Havana USA : Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994*, 13-46.

opportunities for millions of people with a myriad of backgrounds. The concentration of so many different individuals in the same place established New York's profile as one of the most culturally diverse places on earth. Therefore, the city became a haven for immigrants. In the case of Cubans and Puerto Ricans, specifically, New York City became a social and political hub in the late-19th century when a number of Antillean intellectuals moved there to run campaigns for independence from Spain. People like Arturo Schomburg promoted the idea of a multiracial diasporic community, in which the *Antillano* was part of a diverse international society, housed in the multimillion city.⁸ New York was able to offer newcomers an incomparable diversity and a number of already established communities where they could meet people with similar heritage and interests. Nevertheless, fitting in a place like New York had its considerable challenges. Many Cubans found themselves intimidated by the perceived prominence of the social, cultural, ethnic, and racial markers that distinguished them from the majority of New Yorkers, especially after the common struggle with Puerto Ricans against Spain ended. So, many of them quickly saw the benefit in establishing a working relationship with other groups of Latinos, who experienced similar challenges and aspired to similar goals.

According to Laó-Montes understanding *latinidad*, which he defines as "the specific positioning of peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent living in the

⁸ Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, "The World of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg," *Afro-Latin@Reader*.

United States...a historical location with particular historical foundations, hemispheric linkages, and global projections," is crucial in comprehending the history of any Latino minority in New York.⁹ *Latinidad* is, in some ways, a descendant of *hispanidad*, which is a term that in the early 20th century signified the solidarity between "working-class immigrants of Hispanic Caribbean and Spanish descent."¹⁰ Through a complicated process of negotiation, contestation, rejection, and transformation, carried out by a number of different immigrant groups, *latinidad* in the city has come to signify a notion of common identification and familiarity. Thus, Laó-Montes concludes that New York is a place where "Latin American, Caribbean, and Afro-diasporic cultures" constantly come in contact.¹¹

Another reason to focus on New York is the fact that it is the home of the majority of the Afro-Cuban population in the States. Studying the Cuban enclave in the city gives one a perspective on Cuban migration that few have considered in the past. The dominant narrative about Cuban Americans is a tale of economic prosperity, cultural adaptability, and, well, whiteness. This myth has been perpetuated not only by US society, which was still very much plagued by racism in the early 20th century, but also by Cubans themselves. Miamians have a saying: "I'm not black, I'm Cuban," which had helped many to escape the stigma that skin color inevitable inflicted on blacks in the Jim Crow South. Anthropologist Susan Greenbaum argues that often times black Cubans' ethnicity granted them privileges

⁹, Agustín Laó-Montes, "Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City," 3.

¹⁰ Ibid, 5.

¹¹ Ibid, 2.

and resources that their skin color alone would have made impossible to obtain. In addition, they strongly identified as Cuban based on a strong sense of nationhood generally shared by all Cuban immigrants.¹² Patriotism alone was not enough to fit in, however. Gradually, black Cubans, like their white peers, relocated to New York City, which experienced a distinct process of Latino diasporic community formation.

In order to understand what necessity dictated the creation of the Club, it is helpful to look at other Cuban mutual-aid and recreational societies. Most such organizations in Cuba functioned as a way to boost and regulate social activity across the racial spectrum, although they were usually segregated within themselves. In his book *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow*, Frank Guridy provides a glimpse into the *colored societies* (sociedades de color), which emerged in Cuba after Independence in 1902. Club Atenas was the most famous out of all of these. It was created in 1917 by male, upper middle class professionals in order “to model respectable forms of social activity for Afro-Cubans.”¹³ The goal of the Club was to further Afro-Cubans’ claims on equal rights and opportunities, or what Guridy calls “racial elevation,” through mutual aid, education, and recreation.¹⁴ Literary, recreational, feminist, and sports societies of similar purpose were popular all over the island in the early 20th century. In addition, historian Melina Pappademos argues that they framed their goals in both racial and patriotic terms. Such societies provided blacks with the

¹² Susan Greenbaum, *More Than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa*, 8.

¹³ Ibid, 75.

¹⁴ Ibid, 73.

opportunity of finally finding their rightful place in the newly independent country. The early 20th century was a time when negotiating citizenship was a key theme in the rhetoric on the island. Pappademos explains that “this crossroads is also where African-descended Cubans sought to reconcile the disconnect between Cuban modernist imaginings...and their experiences, first as ex-slaves and later as citizens.”¹⁵ Finally, Greenbaum discusses societies, such as the Sociedad la Unión Martí-Maceo, which provided economic safety and institutional belonging to Cuban immigrant cigar workers in Tampa. Based mostly on class solidarity, mutual-aid societies’ activity in Ybor City often blurred national and racial lines to establish standards for behavior, moral conduct, and respectability.¹⁶

CCI did not have a stated racial agenda, even though it is evident from the photos in its archive that the majority of its members were indeed black. It purposefully avoided explicit racial, religious, and political affiliation, and that is one of the reasons why it attracted members not only from the Cuban community in New York, but also a variety of other Latinos. CCI was important because it aspired to be the link between its members and their Cuban heritage, the larger Latino community, and American society. Through its activities it sought to ease immigrants’ transition into their new, double Cuban and American identity. By encouraging them to be socially and politically conscious, as well as morally respectable, the organization made sure that its members were informed, prepared,

¹⁵ Melina Pappademos, *Black Political Activism and the Cuban Republic*, 95.

¹⁶ Susan Greenbaum, *More Than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa*, 148-178.

and deserving enough to obtain all the rights and privileges that they were able to in their new home country. A hub of both familiarity and bustling activity, the Club simultaneously tried to preserve *cubanidad* and promote integration. Through studying the various ways it fulfilled these roles, one can gather a better understanding of the process during which Cuban immigrants became Americans in New York during early 20th century.

Chapter One: The Beginning: Foundation, Membership, and Core Principles

CCI was founded on May 20, 1946, on 914 Prospect Avenue in the Bronx, New York City. The Club's formal purpose was to bring closer together the members of the Cuban enclave in the city, as well as to maintain close ties between Cubans and other Latino immigrants. Its constitution stated that the organization would deliberately remove itself from any political and religious affiliations in order to dedicate all effort to social and cultural activities that would foster a relationship of fraternity and solidarity between its members.¹⁷

In a speech commemorating the founding of the Club, its first president Generoso Pedroso stated that the opening of CCI's building was a transcendental event for Cubans in the city who now had their very own cultural institution based on democratic ideals. Moreover, Pedroso expressed his delight by the presence of "people, who originate from other nationalities, that are happily affiliated with our nascent Institution." The Club was not only open to maintaining friendly relations with other Latinos in New York; it readily welcomed them as full-fledged members "under the glorious inter-American flag of New York."¹⁸ "Interamerican-ness" was a constant theme in CCI's rhetoric, and it stood for both the organization's connections with other Latino communities in the city and its close ties with Cuba, as well. The Club's emphasis on the transnational exchanges between its members

¹⁷ "Proyecto de reglamento" (1946), "Reglamento" folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

¹⁸ "Circular y noticias" folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

and the island conveyed a concept of Cuban identity that combined both Caribbean and North American elements. CCI's "interamerican" foundation served as a bridge between different variations of *cubanidad* and *latinidad*.

The president also used the opportunity to deliver a political message. He explained that the symbolism of the Club's opening date (May 20th then was Cuba's Independence Day) had prompted him to express Cubans' "support for the immediate political improvement of certain brothers of ours, identified with us for racial reasons, language and custom, and who share with us the same dwelling sections and fight the same types of burdens." Here Pedroso refers to Puerto Ricans, who at the time were hopeful for the establishment of an independent republic of Puerto Rico. Pedroso's reference is a perfect example of how CCI constantly delivered subtle political messages, even though its official doctrine postulated against political agenda. Through its intense social work, the Club became a fixture in the Cuban and Latino communities in the city, and thus saw it fit to seamlessly reiterate and build upon the political trends that permeated these minority groups.¹⁹

CCI started out with 134 founding members and consisted of a number of subcommittees that were responsible for various parts of the organization's vibrant cultural activity.²⁰ The group formed committees observing cultural, social,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Relación de socios fundadores," "Founders and Membership" folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

cultural, economic, and juvenile matters, sports, press and propaganda, aid, as well as one that oversaw the production of the Club's official press organ, the Bulletin. To become a member, one needed to fill out an application addressed to the president, with two other members confirming the details, "as a guarantee of the conduct and morality of the applicant." This requirement was one of the many ways in which CCI emphasized its insistence on upholding a high moral standard among its members. Article 29 of the organization's Rules and Regulations informed applicants that if they failed to observe proper composure and their behavior harmed the reputation of the Club, they would be subject to disciplinary suspension and/or expulsion.²¹ The moral premise that the Club included in its membership requirements very much reminds of the model behavior promoted by the societies that Greenbaum, Guridy, and Pappademos describe. The leadership of these organizations aimed at the most favorable social positioning of its members possible, and flawless conduct was an essential part of that image. Members were aware that inappropriate behavior would reflect poorly not only on their own reputation, but on their respective social organization, as well.

Maintaining proper behavior was part of the institution's mission to make the Club a safe space of social and cultural exchange for both its members and their families. CCI regularly reported on the significant events in the lives of its members, such as marriages, births, illnesses, engagements, and even trips they were taking.

²¹ "Proyecto de reglamento" (1946), "Reglamento" folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

This familial demeanor not only ensured close ties within the Club's community, but also its members dedication to the organization and each other. The majority of events that took place on 914 Prospect Ave. were put together through the mutual effort of volunteer members. Volunteers cooked, taught classes, played music, and even lent their furniture when needed. An article from July 1959 reported how at the Dance of the Flowers, organized by the president of the Feminine Committee Ana Gonzalez, "everyone enjoyed themselves like one big family."²²

²² "Boletín oficial" folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Chapter Two: “Born in the irrepressible region of the Maceos...an heiress of the courage, love, intelligence, and dynamic of Mariana Grajales”: *Cubanidad*, femininity, and the longing for the island

The CCI invoked the notion of the family and family values in order to further emphasize the importance of preserving *cubanidad*. In a way, the Cuban community in the city attempted to transplant certain aspects of Cuba into New York because they felt an unbreakable connection to the island. The idea of building and reimagining new nations from outside resonates with other Latino communities in New York, such as the Dominican case that is explored by Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof in his *A Tale of Two Cities*. There he argues that having an active connection with the sending country eases transnational actors' transition in their new environment and helps them retain a distinct identity, which prevents them from getting lost in the larger immigrant community and the host country's culture.²³ According to Nancy Mirabal, this pushing back and forth was very much present since the origins of the Cuban community in New York City. Nation building from outside was important for Cubans, especially in the late 19th century, since they needed a safe space to operate independent of Spanish influence. During that time period the United States was gradually moving toward becoming a new-age empire, which exerted its own political and cultural pull and, therefore, alarmed migrant communities. Thus, for those who were in the city temporarily as exiles and/or activists, it was important

²³ Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, “The World of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg,” *Afro-Latin@Reader*.

that whatever they built in the urban borderland in terms of politics and organizations would be easily transferable back to their place of origin. On the other hand, those who had migrated with the intention to stay permanently sought to obtain US citizenship while preventing their new country from engulfing them culturally.²⁴ While most members of CCI planned on building a life in the United States for themselves and their children, they needed to find balance between American and Cuban culture, and one of the Club's major goals was to somehow reconcile the two.

The process of molding Cuban identity in the city during the period was multilayered. On the one hand, Cubans were determined to preserve the heritage they and their ancestors brought from the island to the United States. Cuban traditions, ideals, and the Spanish language provided individual comfort for many who were struggling with the somewhat daunting reality of immigrant life. It is no wonder then that the Club's regulations postulated that, ideally, both the president and the vice-president of the organizations should be Cuban, or that the organization's letterhead depicted the portraits of Maceo, Marti and Maximo Gomez. At the same time, conserving and passing *cubanidad* on to the younger generations strengthened the bonds within the Cuban community itself. As it often happens, it was easier to achieve social and political visibility when cultural accord was present.

²⁴ Nancy Mirabal, "'No Country But the One We Must Fight For': The Emergence of an Antillean Nation and Community in New York City, 1860-1901." *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, 60-61.

The extensive celebrations of General Antonio Maceo are indicative of Cubans' strong identification with the island and its history. The *cena Maceista* (Maceo supper) was a regular event held at the CCI's building in order to commemorate the death and achievements of General Maceo "and the rest of the heroes fallen for the fatherland."²⁵ Such evenings featured various speeches and panels, such as scholar Heriberto Dixon's "Maceo, my spiritual grandfather." Among the most symbolic leaders of Cuba's independence movement, General Maceo held a special place in immigrants' hearts. Along with José Martí, he represented what many believed was the essence of Cuban spirit: bravery, dedication, and fervent patriotism. In addition to serving as a reminder of the legacy of the Independence War, the memory of General Maceo helped Cubans in the city identify with the homeland. It constantly took immigrants back to the core values that made independence possible and provided a reference for the present.²⁶

In a piece by Edelmiro Duarte Parla, written years later after the Cuban Revolution for the Club's newsletter, the author suggests what would happen if Maceo and the rest of the independence activists were reborn. "[T]he traitors, politicians, and opportunists would have to look for new horizons," he writes, "... and Cuba would be fixed, because the city of Miami would light up...the Castros would not be able to sleep peacefully because the roar of the liberating army's cannons

²⁵ Heriberto Dixon, "El doble exilio del negro Cubano," *El Nuevo Herald*, Oct. 30, 1988, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

²⁶ Ibid.

getting close to the island's capital would prevent them from doing so."²⁷ On the one hand, Duarte Parla demonstrates the belief that anyone who possesses Maceo's true sense of *cubanidad* would be a panacea against corruption and immorality (i.e., the Castros and their followers). On the other hand, he puts forward the idea that Cubans in the United States could very well possess the qualities needed to aid the island out of the Castros' grip. Although mostly unfulfilled and impossible to accomplish, the dream of helping Cuba through the various types of political turmoil it underwent during the 20th century was part of how Cubans in the United States viewed themselves and their duties. For them, Maceo's image was an ever-present reminder of the true meaning of *cubanidad*.

Mariana Grajales, Maceo's mother, was another revolutionary figure who held a symbolic meaning in the eyes of New York Cubans. Regarded as the *madre ejemplar* who had given all her sons away in the name of the revolution, she was as much a reminder of the core Cuban values of patriotism and freedom as Maceo himself was. In an article commemorating Mariana Grajales, Duarte Parla describes her using religious imagery and comparing her to Virgin Mary. The sacrifice Grajales made by encouraging her sons to participate in the Independence War, even though she was aware that their lives were in great danger, could only be compared to the sacrifice made by Christ's mother. Plugging into Cuban Americans' religious consciousness, the author ensures that his audience continued to put independence

²⁷ Edelmiro Duarte Parla "Fragmentos de la historia: Mariana Grajales," "Activities," folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

leaders and values on the highest pedestal. Revering and upholding the values of freedom, selflessness, and bravery was part of the Club's agenda to instill a particular moral foundation in all of its members.

Using female figures to set a positive example for the community was a technique the Club utilized often. Even though its philosophy revolved around the promotion of patriarchal values, CCI was an institution where women often took leadership roles. For instance, 5 out of 16 members of the 1958-59 executive board were women. This was in stark contrast with mutual-aid societies in Cuba, which were fraternal associations that did not prioritize female membership because they interpreted their members' uplift as a process that was solely dependent on the "ideal enlightened man."²⁸ A prime example of CCI's effort to integrate and promote women was Melba Alvarado, the most notable figure associated with the Club. She had been involved with its government and activities since its very creation, served on multiple board positions, including that of president in 1957, 1958, 1969, and 1970, and worked hard to bridge the gap between Cubans and other Latinos in New York.

Born on August 15, 1919 in Cueto, Cuba, Melba Haydez Alvarado Mejias moved with her family to the United States and settled in New York City in the mid-1930s. Even though she was simultaneously studying and holding a job to help out her family, she became involved with community work at a young age. Upon her

²⁸ Frank Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow*, 75.

high school graduation she received a Diploma of Honor from the American Legion for her civic work and the “I Challenge You” prize for her “leadership and contribution to Pan-American activities.”²⁹ Later on, she enrolled at New York City College.³⁰

Among the original founders of CCI, Alvarado served on its board for decades and quickly became one of its prominent leaders. Her executive positions included President, Secretary, Chairman of Finance, and President of the Ladies Committee. She soon grew to be the one person with whom New Yorkers associated the Club, “the back-bone of the Organization.”³¹ The social event “An Evening with Melba,” where people gathered together under her patronage, became a regular occurrence in the 1970s.³²

Alvarado was active in the larger Latino community, as well. She served as the Club’s representative at the Federation of Hispanic Societies, and she also helped organize the first United Hispanic American Parade in New York City in 1965. The event, which became an annual tradition that is still alive to the present day, took place along Fifth Avenue. According to the members of the celebration’s committee, which was representative of 21 Spanish-speaking countries, it “commemorate[d] the Discovery of the New World in the name of Spain and [was] the base of Unity

²⁹ “Curriculon vitae,” “Melba Alvarado” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Una tarde con Melba,” “Melba Alvarado” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

³² Ibid.

among the Hispanics in the New York Metropolitan Area.”³³ Alvarado served as president of that committee in 1973, participated in the Bronx Community Action Program, and was a member of the Congress of Hispanic Societies.

Alvarado’s devotion to the improvement of community life and promotion of Latino culture has been recognized multiple times. Some of her awards feature a Certificate for Appreciation from the city of New York, acknowledgments from various Latino organizations including the Dominican Civic Center and the Ecuadorian House of Culture, and a Ribbon of the Dame of the Order of Isabella the Catholic, granted by the King of Spain. Alvarado’s colleagues highlighted the importance of her cross-cultural community work, saying she was well aware of the fact that “a better life for the Hispanics constitutes a better life for all New Yorkers.” They described her as a “good Bronxite” whose efforts targeted a versatile population of different ages and ethnic origins.³⁴

An op-ed from October 1973 defines Alvarado as “an example of a leader. She is firm, consistent, talented. A woman with character. But gentle and sweet.”³⁵ People found it impressive that her femininity and nurturing instincts successfully coexisted with her activist work. It is interesting to note that for Alvarado, a woman of color, her skin color rarely proved an obstacle in a highly prejudiced society such

³³ “Memoria annual,” “Activities” folder, Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

³⁴ “Melba Alvarado” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

³⁵ Lázaro Ginebra, “Melba Alvarado: un símbolo,” *El Tiempo*, Oct. 31, 1973, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

as the United States in the mid-20th century. Moreover, some even treated her racial background as an advantage and a tool to deliver patriotic messages. “Melba Alvarado, born in the irrepressible region of the Maceos...is an heiress of the courage, love, intelligence, and dynamic of Mariana Grajales [Maceo’s mother],” says the op-ed.³⁶ The symbolism here is apparent: Cubans regard Mariana Grajales, also an Afro-Cubana, as the *madre ejemplar* (exemplary mother) and a vital part of the island’s independence struggle.

Many club members viewed Alvarado’s accomplishments as a positive antithesis of racial intolerance in the United States because, as the author points out, “there are no complexes or prejudices in her conduct. Her heart is in every hug.”³⁷ She was an example of how, contrary to the stereotypes, a woman of color could turn into an uplifting role model for an entire community: “Fundamentally, the cultural and educational efforts of that...woman have elevated the prestige of the complex and apathetic Latin American society in New York.”³⁸ In many ways Melba Alvarado invoked the idea of the socially and politically conscious woman that Mariana Grajales was. However, instead of limiting her contribution to society’s improvement to raising male leaders, she herself took on leadership positions. Alvarado, who never married, popularized the image of the black Latina activist, who worked hard not only to address issues in her own surroundings, but also to find ways to bring together members of different communities. She was kind and

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

caring, but not in the traditional motherly way. Rather than limiting her effort to just her own family, she used her qualities to improve the lives of the community at large.

The food that the Club catered to its events also had a distinct Cuban flavor. For instance, the menu at one *Cena Maceista* included Creole beef jerky, rice and beans, yucca and sangria – all of which at Cuban cuisine staples. The dinner at the *Baile de los Excursionistas* in August 1959 featured “sweets made with Cuban sugar,” and at the regular evenings with *Melba* one could enjoy a “traditional menu” of *carne asada* (roasted meat) and *arroz con frijoles negros* (rice with black beans). A powerful cultural transmitter, food in the CCI context delivered a little flavor from home at every event that the Club hosted.³⁹

Another bond between many Cubans in New York City was their observance of the Catholic faith. They participated in a variety of religious events, such as the mass and procession in honor of the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (Cuba’s patron saint). CCI had a relationship with the *Medalla Milagrosa* church on 110 St and 7th Ave, which was popular among the Cuban enclave. Members of the Club were even able to make donations to the church at the Club.⁴⁰

In addition, CCI received strong support from Cuba. For instance, in 1951 the newly elected Club’s president Narciso Saavedra received a number of congratulatory messages from the island. Among them were notes from the mayor

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Activities” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

of the Santa Clara municipality, R. Cabrera, Major General of the army, the Minister of Communications, the secretary of the Havana Rotary Club, and the president of the Cuban Senate. Moreover, it also received the approval of organizations in Cuba that had a similar mission, such as “Union Fraternal,” a cultural society for welfare and recreation in Havana and “El Club Patriotico Social Cuba.” Finally, the most prominent mutual-aid society on the island, the Club Atenas, elected to hold its annual Day in New York at the Club in May 1975.⁴¹

Another way CCI upheld *cubanidad* was by commemorating a number of traditional Cuban holidays every year. Some of them were tightly related to Cuba and reinforced the preservation of émigré’s historical memory. For instance, members celebrated May 20 (Cuba’s independence from the United States) and Grito de Yara (the beginning of the Ten Years’ War) with big dance parties. They also participated in major Latino celebrations in New York City, such as Dia de la Raza and the United Hispanic American parades. The Club participated with its own platform that displayed important dates in Cuban history and featured a dark-skinned girl symbolizing mother Cuba.⁴²

CCI strove to bring a variety of Cuban entertainers to its events. Those performers not only popularized the island’s culture, but they also relieved, at least temporarily, immigrants’ nostalgia. Singer Benny Moré performed multiple times for the members of the Club Cubano Inter-Americano at events held both at the Club

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

and other locales, such as hotels and restaurants. After one of his performances, at the Statler Hilton hotel in 1959, the reviews indicated that Moré gave a riveting performance. Moré made a surprise appearance at the party that celebrated the annual trip of Cuban excursionists to the United States, and the Club's bulletin reported that "a great delight was to see how artistic personas of our Cuba are idolized by all *Hispanos Neoyorquinos* (Hispanic New Yorkers)."⁴³ Since non-Cubans often attended CCI events, the organization emphasized that affection for Moré was "deeply rooted in the hearts of all Cubans and the Latin Colony in general."⁴⁴ Another performer that same night was the orchestra "Oriental Cubana," which transported émigrés right back to the island. "It made us listen, feel and dance the Cuban music as if we were in "Union Fraternal" during one day of those famous "Bailables Blancos," the bulletin raved. Thus, such performances also highlighted not only everyone's appreciation of Cuban artistic export, but also the cultural similarities between Latinos in the city. In addition, it is important to recognize the significance of the Union Fraternal reference. The Union Fraternal was the largest and most powerful Afro-Cuban society on the island. As Pappademos points out, it promoted universal ideas of refinement and respectability, but it was simultaneously racially conscious about its politics. Thus, the fact that a member of

⁴³ "Statler Hotel Hilton, Penn Top baile de los excursionistas," "Boletín oficial" folder (1959), "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the CCI referred to Union Fraternal suggests the existence of a strong Afro-Cuban membership, which had to grapple with its own identity negotiations.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Melina Pappademos, *Black Political Activism and the Cuban Republic*, 58, 148, 165, 168.

Chapter Three: “Call it Latin, call it Afro-Cuban...that marriage was made in jazz heaven”: Music and the bridging of the gaps between identities

The Moré example and the Bulletin’s reaction to it illustrate the way music played into the discourse about Cuban community formation in New York. Tony Fletcher’s book *All Hopped Up and Ready to Go: Music from the Streets of New York 1927-77* offers a glimpse on negotiating *latinidad* and race relations through the prism of music. He focuses on Harlem, specifically the area between 130th St. north to 143th and from 7th Av. east to Madison, but his analysis also goes more in depth regarding the difficulties that Harlemites experienced in the context of New York. Fletcher explains that between 1904, when black entrepreneur Phillip Payton established the Afro-American Realty Company “with the specific intent of filling Harlem’s empty buildings with black residents” and 1930, when musician Mario Bauzá relocated there from Cuba, the neighborhood was already a heavily populated area with its own distinct culture.⁴⁶

Harlem’s black community, along with New York’s vast number of recording studios and record companies proved extremely attractive for talented black foreigners like Bauzá. However, Fletcher warns, Harlem was not simply an idyllic community where blacks enjoyed unseen liberties. On the contrary, he offers the valuable insight that when Bauzá and others like him arrived to the city, they realized that “Harlem...had become a black city within a city largely because black

⁴⁶ Tony Fletcher, *All Hopped Up and Ready to Go: Music from the Streets of New York, 1927-77*, 3.

people were not equal citizens elsewhere in New York.”⁴⁷ One could easily tell that the neighborhood was a place where city governance did not consider it necessary to invest taxpayers’ money. Fletcher says that the unemployment rate in the neighborhood throughout the first half of the 20th century often hovered around 50%, education and healthcare were inadequate, and rent was unreasonably high because blacks usually were not permitted to live anywhere else in Manhattan.

Bauzá and Machito, another influential Cuban musician and founder of the “Afro-Cubans” band, are good examples of how Cubans in New York used music not only to preserve and popularize their heritage, but also to find their niche in American society. Indeed, Bauzá was mesmerized by the potential that the US market had for musicians like him when he first arrived in the United States in 1926. “I was overwhelmed by the negro shows at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem,” he said, “The jazz...black men and women doing their thing, no interference, no signs of racism.”⁴⁸ However, when in 1937 various Latino musicians in New York banded together with the demand to gain representation in the musicians’ union, Bauzá was disappointed to realize that there were only white musicians present at the meeting. Infuriated, he questioned them, “Why didn’t you invite the Afro-Cubans and Afro Puerto-Ricans who you won’t give a job to... I never saw a black musician work in a

⁴⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁴⁸ “Cubop!: The Life and Music of Maestro Mario Bauzá.” New York: The Caribbean Cultural Center, 8.

Latin orchestra in midtown.”⁴⁹ Soon after, he was fired from Webb’s band when a club owner refused to let the band play as long as the black Bauzá was in it.

In addition, the challenges many Cuban musicians faced due to racial prejudice were further complicated by the internal struggle within black Caribbean communities, and Ruth Glasser’s work sheds some much-needed light on the subject. According to her, limited employment opportunities due to race-related restrictions were the main trigger for intraracial conflict. Upon arriving to New York, Latino musicians of color encountered a rigid set of stereotypes to which they had to adapt. Due to the fact that mixed bands were extremely rare and unwelcome to perform in the majority of locales, black musicians had to form and join all-black bands, which encountered issues like lack of union representation and difficulties finding food and lodging while on tour. Glasser maintains that this lack of resources was the cause for fierce competition between all dark-skinned migrants in New York. In fact, Bauzá himself criticized the sense of superiority exhibited by some light-skinned Latinos. Glasser explains that he did not look favorably upon light-skinned bands, which played in white clubs, because he believed that a unification along color and cultural lines would provide black musicians of all nationalities with good bargaining tools.⁵⁰

Moreover, she suggests that an intraracial conflict existed between black Latinos and African Americans, as well. According to her, as race in the former

⁴⁹ Ibid, 9.

⁵⁰ Ruth Glasser, *My Music is My Flag*, 71-79.

Atlantic colonies is a much more complicated concept than in the United States, many migrants developed antagonistic attitudes toward US blacks because they saw them as the reason why they were viewed as inferior. In many cases this feeling of hostility was a primary reason why many Latinos passionately held on to their ethnic identity. "The question of ethnic loyalty was reinforced by race," Glasser argues, pointing out that, similarly to Bauzá, Schomburg was heavily criticized when he moved to an African American community for research purposes. All in all, it would be naïve to conclude that just because certain people lived in close proximity to each other and experienced similar obstacles, they would necessarily form strong unions. While black Cubans and other Latinos in New York often formed alliances with each other and with African Americans due to shared racial and/or cultural traits, the specificity of the conditions in New York sometimes obstructed the development of such bonds.⁵¹

Having witnessed the situation first-hand, Bauzá quickly became aware of a few important facts, one being that he needed a black friend who would navigate him through the initial adjustment, and for him that person was Cuban musician Alberto Socarras. Another unexpected discovery was that Latin bands in the city were largely "lily-white," which severely limited his job options.⁵² Thus, Bauzá joined Chick Webb's band and began playing exclusively with other black musicians. Now that he had realized the importance of surrounding himself with good, reliable

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Cubop!: The Life and Music of Maestro Mario Bauzá." New York: The Caribbean Cultural Center, 10.

people in that unpredictable environment, the talented performer invited his brother-in-law Frank “Machito” Grillo, also a musician, to join him from Cuba in 1937. Fletcher explains that at that point both Bauzá and Machito had reached the conclusion that even if they were able to join a regular Latin band, racial discrimination would severely limit their opportunities for exposure and ultimately destine them to mediocrity. Therefore, the two decided to create an orchestra that would play only Cuban music. This is how “Machito and His Afro-Cubans” was born in 1939 “in defiance of the American perception of Cuban music as the watered-down rhumbas and congas of Duke Ellington, Xavier Cugat, and Cab Calloway.”⁵³ The author argues that the emergence of the orchestra was a key event that simultaneously functioned as a nationalist statement for the growing Cuban population in the United States and a symbol of racial solidarity with African Americans. In the words of percussionist Booby Sanabria, the act of the orchestra naming itself “the Afro-Cubans,” was “one of the bravest acts in the history of the civil rights movement.”⁵⁴

Bauzá and Machito’s achievement in bridging the gap between Cuban and American culture became widely recognized and appreciated as the 20th century progressed. In September 1986 NYC mayor Ed Koch presented Bauzá with the NYC Certificate of Appreciation for his contribution to jazz and Latin music. “Mario was intent on bringing together the rhythms and sounds of Latin music with American

⁵³ Ibid, 17.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 19.

jazz...Call it Latin, call it Afro-Cuban...that marriage was made in jazz heaven,” Koch said.⁵⁵ The fact that a Cuban-born musician received an award for developing a genre that originated in the United States is a significant indicator of how embedded Cubans were in the NYC cultural scene. Music was one way for immigrants to really leave an imprint in their receiving country and prove that they were working hard to expand and develop local culture – it was a gateway to acceptance. When Machito died in 1986, Mayor Koch said, “I think of him as the consummate New Yorker: he was a world-renowned leader of Afro-Cuban music, and an inspiration to jazz musicians everywhere for the past 40 years.”⁵⁶ Through his cultural contribution, Machito had turned into a full-fledged American celebrity, regardless of his national origin and his race, which had obstructed his professional development earlier on.

Hollywood in the 1940s also did a lot to popularize Latino music in the United States. Personalities like Carmen Miranda, Xavier Cugat, and Desi Arnez helped spread Latino rhythms throughout the country and facilitated the acceptance of genres like Afro-Cuban jazz. Both Bauzá and Machito enjoyed working with other musicians from other background, especially during their early years in New York when they did not know many Cubans. “When I started there were not many Latin musicians around and the American musicians didn’t know about this music, ”

⁵⁵ Ibid, 14.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Bauzá recalls. “The very first band had just three Americans. It was a ‘rainbow band’ ...It had Filipinos, Italians, Jews...”⁵⁷

Bauzá, however, was adamant that any band he led was going to first and foremost strive to preserve its island flavor. “We are playing Cuban music, and we always will,” he said in 1952.⁵⁸ Puerto Rican musician Tito Puente, who played in Machito’s band remembers how much both Bauzá and Machito insisted on preserving that unique Cuban flavor. “We always kept the authenticity, no matter what,” he said. “As we progressed, we Americanized... I guess we wanted a more diverse audience, a wider acceptance...We have always been considered a second band, a relief band for the headliner. Despite this we have prospered.”⁵⁹

It is no surprise then that Cuban artists often brought out the most intimate nostalgic emotions from their listeners. In the fall of 1959 the Club held a celebration of the Cuban concert pianist Jorge Bolet. Eusebia Cosme, the extraordinary orator and Cuba’s “black luminous star,” also took part in the event.⁶⁰ Cosme, “the ambassador of the popular poetry of our *patria*,” came to the United States to recite Afro-Antillean poems in order to “humbly convey to listeners everywhere the feelings—the pains, sorrows, joys—of my race.”⁶¹ Her recitals

⁵⁷ Juan Carlo Coto, “At 80, Mario Bauzá still carries the fresh beat of Afro-Cuban jazz,” *The Miami Herald*.

⁵⁸ Max Salazar, “Machito, Mario and Graciela: Destined for Greatness,” *Latin Beat*.

⁵⁹ Fernando Gonzalez, “Father of Afro-Cuban jazz comes full circle,” *Globe*.

⁶⁰ Germán Arciniegas, Apolo y la negra Eusebia en Nueva York, “Eusebia Cosme” Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁶¹ Ibid., and “Disease Eusebia Cosme Recites Emotion Of Race Through Poetry: Cuban Negress States Need To ‘Feel Rhythm,’ Yield to Instinct for Accurate

reminded her listeners of the struggles of Cuban blacks, a theme that was relatable to many members of the Club. The stories of Pancha, the black girl who works strenuously all day, but still has energy to spend all night dancing, or the slavewoman of Regino Boti and her heartbreaking lullaby, brought vivid memories and visions of the island. So did other renowned Cuban artists who visited New York, such as electrifying Celia Cruz, the trio Metamoros, and orator Ernesto Gallardo. Not surprisingly then, after Moré's concert, "like a work of magic, the [hotel] was transformed into a little piece of Cuba."⁶²

Interpretation," The Yale Daily News, Nov. 29, 1948, "Eusebia Cosme" Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁶² "Statler Hotel Hilton, Penn Top baile de los excursionistas," "Boletín oficial" folder (1959), "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Chapter Four: “The place of honor that we have in the concert of Hispanic societies of New York”: The CCI and its role as a Latino community organization

Being part of the larger Latino community was another important aspect of how Cubans viewed themselves and New York City was an excellent place to find a large, diverse group of Latinos. Unpacking the construction of New York as a “borderland,” a space where Caribbean and Latin American people grappled with the concept of *latinidad*, is indispensable in understanding the fluid concept of “Cuban American.” Laó-Montes explains that, “as the largest and most important city of the U.S. empire,” New York since the 19th century has hosted a multitude of cultural and political expressions related to Latin America and the Caribbean alike.⁶³ Especially in the late-19th century, it was an important place for gathering and organizing of Cuban and Puerto Rican independence leaders, who were involved in anticolonial movements and projects of creating and consolidating new national identities. And although initially those migrants were labeled as “Latin Americans,” later the designation shifted to “Latinos,” which Laó-Montes justifies with the earlier positioning of identity primarily outside of the United States versus its subsequent situating within the U.S. American space. This shift was closely related to an increased immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean, especially following the Spanish American war. The vast changes, which occurred in Cuba and Puerto Rico, for example, led to spiking unemployment because their economies had to

⁶³ Ibid, 7.

undergo numerous lengthy transformations that would ensure their competitiveness on the global market. That, coupled with an increased US influence in the region, led many to regularly travel or permanently migrate to the hegemon in the North.

Nancy Mirabal also attempts to answer some of the questions concerning the relationship between Cubans and other Latinos in the city. She argues that already by the mid-19th century, Cubans and Puerto Ricans, for instance were involved in a collective anticolonial struggle. They participated in political organizations and cultural clubs, published newspapers, and formed revolutionary groups. Often times the two populations cooperated in order to work against Spain toward the independence of what some scholars call the “Antillean nation.”⁶⁴ Mirabal contends that, as a political community, Cubans and Puerto Ricans were able to reimagine that Antillean nation and identity without necessarily compromising their individual nationalistic traits or goals. As she puts it, that was “the ability to create one concept of nation based on mutuality without relinquishing another concept based on cultural exclusivity.”⁶⁵ Moreover, in the case of Cubans in New York, diverging opinions about the role the United States should play in the politics of the island post-Independence meant that being Cuban in itself sometimes was not a unifying enough factor. According to Mirabal, Cubans and Puerto Ricans who were against US

⁶⁴ Nancy Mirabal, “‘No Country But the One We Must Fight For’: The Emergence of an Antillean Nation and Community in New York City, 1860-1901,” *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, 59.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

hegemony formed a number of political and cultural clubs together and disseminated propaganda publications, which often contained the term *las Antillas* in order to emphasize their alliance. The Spanish language, too, was a powerful tool for creating a shared political community, she explains. Using Spanish not only created a place of inclusion and unity between those who spoke it, but it was also “making a point to exclude those who did not.”⁶⁶

In addition, close relationships based on ethnic propinquity in migrant communities could convey a lot of important information about individual groups, and therefore, it is worth peeking into how the literature treats the connection between Cubans and Puerto Ricans in New York City. In Laó-Montes’s point of view, for instance, *latinidad* is inherently related to a manifold nationalism, which consists of a pan-Latin American-and-Caribbean part and an individual nationalist component. In fact, one could justify a side-to-side comparison of the Cuban and Puerto Rican migrant groups using Laó-Montes’s assertion that there exists a common identity “based on shared economic, political, and cultural subordination, an ensemble of different historical experiences, cultural expressions, and social locations.”⁶⁷

Thus, it was only natural that the CCI prided itself in being a cultural hub not only for its Cuban members but for other Latinos, as well. A statement from the committee, which had the task of organizing the celebrations honoring General

⁶⁶ Ibid, 61.

⁶⁷ Agustín Laó-Montes, "Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City," 11.

Antonio Maceo's centennial, reveals the sense of accomplishment that the Club derived from possessing "the place of honor that we have in the concert of Hispanic societies of New York." The CCI enjoyed that special position, the committee claimed, due to the bustling cultural activity that took place in its salons.

Indeed, the numerous conferences, tributes, celebrations of Cuba and inter-American commemorations, were all part of a well-engineered agenda that had the goal of uniting people with common roots. The Club brought to its halls an array of distinguished speakers, such as Juan Marinello, 20th century-Cuban poet and essayist; Jose Coll y Cuchi, a lawyer, writer, and founder of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party; Lazaro Peña, Cuban labor movement leader; and Jesus Colon, Puerto Rican writer and father of the Nuyorican Movement. Evidently, many of those speakers were not Cuban, yet they were welcome at the CCI because they spoke of issues that were relevant to multiple groups within the Latino enclave. Thus, a major purpose of the celebrations and events that the Club put together was to expand its partnership with others.⁶⁸

For instance, every year the Club organized a celebration for the participants in a so-called "Social and Cultural Trip of the United States." The trip gave Cubans the opportunity to travel around the United States and get to know the country. When they stopped in New York, CCI put together an annual reception in order to introduce the visitors to the local Latino population. As the Club's Journal from 1968

⁶⁸ Activities" folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

points out, the purpose of the voyage was to “transform what before had been a mere trip of pleasure and rest, to a trip of learning, rapport and exchange between [members of] the Hispanic colony.” In addition, the report stated:

We have invited our brothers from America with the objective of making clear one more time the existing spirit of solidarity and brotherhood which increases the culture in all its angles in order to strengthen the fraternal interamerican ties in this city of New York.⁶⁹

The CCI also participated regularly in the Hispanic Day Parade. The parade commemorated the common American heritage of Latinos in the city. It emphasized the fact that Latinos were unlike Europeans because they were a new, universal Indo-American race, created by the mixture of blacks, Indians, and white conquistadors. The parade doesn’t refer to any country in particular,” *El Tiempo* wrote. “It’s all of our Latin American America.”⁷⁰

Sports, too, were a venue where Latinos could come together, with baseball being the most popular. CCI had its own team, managed by Basilio Cueira. The team competed in the Latino baseball league in the city, which contained a total of six teams. The Club published regular updates regarding the team’s performance and out together benefits, such as “The Dance of the Ball,” had the goal of collecting contributions for the team. Moreover, since the organization emphasized the importance of sports in its members’ lives, it hosted celebrations of various sports

⁶⁹ “Journal” folder (Aug. 1958), “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁷⁰ Jon Pareles, “Machito, Bandleader, Dead: Brought a Latin Beat to Jazz,” *The New York Times*.

personalities, as well. One such party, where “delicious Cuban food was served [and] toasts were made with fine liquors,” was dedicated to Cuban-born baseball player Jose Valdivielso.⁷¹

Historian Adrian Burgos argues that the game was one factor that eased the transition of those migrants because most of them already knew it well due to its immense popularity in their home countries. Playing well, according to the author, affirmed the masculinity of Latino men because of their traditionally subordinate position both on the baseball diamond and in US society at large. Burgos says that the arrival of many players from places like Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic in the first decades of the 20th century coincided with the mass settlement of Latinos throughout the City. Baseball and other shared activities “aided the process whereby they became more than Cubans, Puerto Ricans, or Dominicans...[they] facilitated their becoming Latino.”⁷² Although yielding a similar outcome, this process of forming a collective identity is different from the one Mirabal describes. It looks like while during the revolutionary struggle unity was conceptualized for political purposes and then intentionally fortified with community actions, in later years it arose circumstantially from shared mundane activities and was subsequently utilized for staging social and political demands.

⁷¹ “Boletín oficial” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁷² Adrian Burgos, “The Latins from Manhattan”: Confronting Race and Building Community in Jim Crow Baseball, 1906-1950,” *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, 75.

A lot of evidence about the Cuban-interamerican connection in the city is also present in the Club's main printed outlet: the Boletín Oficial (Official Bulletin). The Bulletin's main purpose was to convey courtesy messages, greetings, and advertisements within the Cuban community in the city. However, the Club encouraged members to use the Bulletin as a medium to reach out not only to members, but also to other "inter-Americanos" and vice versa. By doing that, the Bulletin would help "affirm the desire for continental brotherhood that must unite our nations."⁷³

Flipping through the Bulletin's pages, one encounters numerous articles, notes, and announcement for various activities alternating with advertisements for Latino-owned businesses. Ads promoting various enterprises indicate the all-encompassing Latino presence in New York.⁷⁴ One advertisement of a music shop offered typical musical instruments like bongos, congas, and maracas, which were otherwise difficult to find in New York. Another promoted the El Mundial Spanish-American restaurant, which specialized in Spanish, Creole, and Mexican dishes. A different restaurant, Fuentes, catered the typical Cuban and Puerto Rican dishes mofongo con pollo (chicken and plantain pie), lechon asado (roasted piglet), and arroz con pollo (rice with chicken). The Puerto Rico World Airway Agency advertised its service in "transporting your relatives from Puerto Rico." A funeral home, called Funeraria Monge, explained that it was an expert in embalming and

⁷³ "Boletín oficial" folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

transporting cadavers to all parts of the world.” From birth to death, Latinos could take advantage of a multitude of products and services that were aimed at making their cultures and homelands a bit more accessible.

The bulletin showed its readers that if they wanted to, they could satisfy their consumer needs in Latino grocery, furniture, and dressmaking stores, bakeries, beauty parlors, and jewelry shops. Longwood Beauty Parlor, for instance, advertised itself as “expert in all grades of hair and hair styles,” which hints to the fact that many Latinas, especially those of African descent, needed customized care because their hair required different approach from their counterparts of European heritage.⁷⁵ Thus, in these initial years, the Club Cubano Inter-Americano made certain to recognize and embrace the distinctness of the Latino enclave in the city. This tactic indicated the Club’s desire to integrate into the long-lasting tradition of mutual cooperation.

The organization also attempted to extend its message beyond its immediate surroundings through demonstrating an understanding of international affairs and an acceptance of universal values. Founded in the end of World War II, it expressed its position as simply “an atom in the universal consciousness,” embracing justice, liberty, fraternity, and social solidarity as means to grapple with “the uncertainty in which the world lives.”⁷⁶ Such proclamations ensured the Club an even larger base of support, as evident from a note from the Spanish Workers’ Club, saying, “We

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Nuestro saludo” (1947), “Boletín oficial” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

salute and thank you for your cooperation in the entire campaign for our cause for the reestablishment of the Republic of Spain.”⁷⁷ Moreover, CCI provided support for other Latinos even outside of New York. In 1962 it received a certificate of honor for the generous contribution it made toward the construction of the Center for Rehabilitation in Rio Piedras in Puerto Rico for housing and rehabilitation of children and adults.⁷⁸

The hope for a cross-community outreach certainly was not one-sided. The very first page of the 1947 Club’s Bulletin expresses “appreciation...to the Hispanic colony in general...for its contribution to our publication and constant support for our development through the activities that have signaled our cultural and social progress....”⁷⁹ It seems that even though the organization had not been around for a long time, it had succeeded in gaining support from a variety of Latino venues in the city. A message from members of the Latino community to the Club noted:

The contribution of Club Cubano Inter-Americano to the culture and social improvement of the Hispanic colony in New York has earned it accolades among the associations of its kind and is regarded with sympathy and support from those, who, like us, utilize it as our voice.⁸⁰
The spirit of Pan-Latino cooperation is visible through the multitude of congratulatory messages printed on the pages of the bulletin and also from the

⁷⁷ “Boletín oficial” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁷⁸ “Awards and certificates” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ “Boletín oficial” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Club's attempts to loyally serve that demographic. CCI also collaborated with other distinct cultural organizations, such as the Chilean Cultural Club.⁸¹

⁸¹ "Book of Acts" folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Chapter Five: “I feel pretty American”: Cubans heritage and American citizenship?

After all, however, Cubans had come to New York City because, for various reasons, they believed life would be better there than in Cuba. There was something about the United States that was worth leaving the homeland for, and most immigrants realized that becoming a meaningful part of US society would bring them close to their individual goals. While they were persistent in preserving Cuban culture and traditions, they also worked hard to understand and accept US social, political, and cultural life.

In an article for the *Mademoiselle* magazine, Frank Harriott argued that even though New Yorkers in the 1930s and 1940s often pictured Cubans and other Caribbeans as foreign and exotic, the “tropic allure” associated with them had been replaced by a nascent sense of Americanness. According to Harriott, members of the multiracial Caribbean community were living in every single borough in New York City, occupied a wide variety of jobs, and were represented on all levels of the socioeconomic scale. “You don’t have to look for the Caribbean in New York,” Harriott, himself with a Panamanian and St. Vincentian heritage, said. “He’s practically everywhere.” However, he pointed out that despite the fact that most Caribbeans in the city did become US citizens, they had a strong sense of homeland, which prompted them to become members of benevolent societies and Clubs related to their birthplace. Regardless of the heavy feeling of nostalgia, however, Harriott’s article portrays New York City as a place where Latinos from different

parts of the Caribbean had found a home and occupation and were steadily infiltrating all layers of society. It was becoming clear that Caribbeans were there to prosper and stay.⁸²

Thus, a multitude of social organizations worked hard to help Cubans and other Latinos in the city ease into the American way of living. In addition to the events that celebrated Cuba and its history and culture, CCI put together a number of typically American celebrations. For instance, there was an annual “Dance of the Enamored” celebrating Valentine’s Day every February and a “Festival of the Witches” as part of the annual Halloween festivities in New York City. As New York City lit up for its traditional holidays each year, Club members also got caught up in the merriment because being part of US culture meant participating in US traditions. However, Cubans made sure to bring variety to these events. In February 1972, for example, the Valentine’s Day dance at CCI featured the Cuban orchestra “Tipica novel” and the Dominican sensation “Heriberto Penn y su Orquesta” (Heriberto Penn and his orchestra).⁸³

Moreover, the Club encouraged its members to be productive and conscientious members of US society. For instance, it urged its members and other Latinos to fulfill their civic duty as citizens of the United States. In July 1969 it published a short statement inviting people to prepare for the upcoming elections in

⁸² Frank Harriott, *Mademoiselle* (Mar. 1946), “Eusebia Cosme” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁸³ “Book of Acts” folder, “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

November. "We are obligated to go to the ballot boxes with the maximum responsibility that submitting a vote demands," the announcement reads. This reminded Latinos that being part of US society involved a degree of political responsibility. Taking part in voting not only fulfilled their citizen duty, but it also ensured that their minority voice would be heard and recognized.⁸⁴ Moreover, the Club also published guidelines and organized sessions during which volunteers explained the mechanics of social security and disability and unemployment insurance. These were concepts that could prove daunting for new-comers, or to those whose English language skills were not up to par.⁸⁵ For that purpose, the Club also offered weekend English classes for its members.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ "Boletín oficial" folder, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Chapter Six: It's there and it isn't: Race as the unspoken building block of community formation

Regardless of CCI's affirmations that race had little to do with the organization's core values, it is impossible to not notice that an overwhelming majority of its members were black. The question of race additionally complicated living in the New York borderland. During a time of intense racial segregation in the United States, it mattered a lot whether one was a white, light-skinned, or black Cuban. One's skin color led to a whole different set of relationships between Cubans, other Latinos, and U.S. Americans. Negotiating blackness in New York City is one of the most significant parts of Cuban American self-identification.

According to Burgos, the process of negotiating the idea of diaspora in New York City's Latino population is key to understanding Cubans and other Latinos living in that border zone. Active community formation in Harlem, he argues, "underscored the Spanish-speaking Caribbean's place within the African diaspora."⁸⁷ From a transnational perspective, New York was a place, whose specific location and racial composition actively interacted with ideas of color in migrants' corresponding national communities. Burgos points out that New York, and Harlem especially, "served as a nodal point of intersecting diasporas."⁸⁸ He sees Harlemites as their own community existing within the city's black population and creating a

⁸⁷ Adrian Burgos, "'The Latins from Manhattan': Confronting Race and Building Community in Jim Crow Baseball, 1906-1950," *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, 74.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

unique cultural output. Moreover, he argues that, “migrants and immigrants did not leave one society and replace it with another; rather, they lived in both, sometimes uncomfortably and certainly confusingly.”⁸⁹ Thus, the idea of New York as a borderland manifests itself again: Latino immigrants of color had to straddle the border between Harlem and the rest of the city’s black population, but also between Harlem and the black community where they were originally from.

It is important to note that flyers for the Club’s events, as well as its founding documents and promotional literature, do not explicitly specify race as a key feature of the organization’s structure. However, as mentioned before, a number of examples from various activities point to the fact that the Club catered to the social and intellectual needs of Afro-Cubans, living in New York City.

In the midst of severe *de jure* discriminatory practices in the southern United States and *de facto* restrictions in the North, it was remarkable that Cubans of African descent were predominantly present at most of the Club’s celebrations. What is even more significant is that, contrary to the segregationist rhetoric of the time, the society’s members celebrated black features as a model of beauty. For instance, in the CCI’s archive one can find images from fashion shows that the organization hosted, where most models are black. The Club became a place where

⁸⁹ Ibid, 75.

women of color, who U.S. society had abused, mocked, and stereotyped for centuries, were often able to feel beautiful and accepted.⁹⁰

As beauty pageants, such as the “Club Cubano Inter-Americano Queen” became a regular occurrence, they reinforced the positive self image of members as the crown usually went to Afro-Cuban girls. Another image shows an Afro-Cubana receiving her pageant award, while in a different photograph Melba Alvarado presents the recognition to another black contestant. It is telling that Alvarado, herself a woman of color, was one of the most celebrated personalities at the Club and occupied multiple positions of power. Her prominence shows that blacks at the organization enjoyed many freedoms that they did not necessarily possess in other parts of New York City and the United States in general in the mid-20th century.⁹¹

Other community events were also occasions where the predominantly black racial consistency of the Club became apparent. Another photograph shows members gathered around a newly-founded memorial of General Maceo, one of the most prominent Afro-Cubans in the history of the island. Moreover, as mentioned before, the Club made an effort to invite prominent Afro-Cuban performers to entertain its members, including renowned black singer Celia Cruz.⁹²

The isolation of the black Cuban is a frequent theme in many discussions regarding immigrants in the United States. According to scholar Heriberto Dixon, in

⁹⁰ “Club Cubano Inter-Americano” photograph collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

1970 58.8 percent of Afro-Cuban exiles in the country lived in the Northeast, especially New York and New Jersey, because they wanted to avoid the racism of white Cubans, who lived predominantly in Florida. Says Dixon:

The discrimination against black Cubans had been surprisingly more elevated in areas of a significant concentration of Cubans...than in other white, black, or mixed zones. The black population of Little Havana [the Cuban district in Miami]...had reached an insignificant 0.8 percent.⁹³

Many attribute such attitudes to a legacy of racial prejudice that Cubans brought with them, especially after the Revolution in 1959, combined with the entrenched American segregationist practices. Thus, New York City became one of the places where Afro-Cubans sought a more diverse, welcoming environment, while Club Cubano offered a space, where they could actively participate in various social activities. All in all, it seems that the celebration of Cuban origins overshadowed African ancestry in the Club. However, members of color enjoyed the privileges that their white counterparts did, and they were a vital part of all activities. Finally, participating in events, which paid tribute to their roots, assisted Afro-Cubans in the process of reconciliation of their racial and national heritage.

⁹³ Heriberto Dixon, "El doble exilio del negro Cubano," *El Nuevo Herald*, Oct. 30, 1988, "Club Cubano Inter-Americano" collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Conclusion

This project offers a variety of angles through which to situate Cuban immigrants within the context of early 20th century New York. However, there are a number of questions that arise from this work that merit further research. The first one concerns the difference between using the terms “Latino,” “Latin American,” and “Caribbean” when referring to Cubans as an individual group or as part of a collective. Before embarking on my dissertation project, I would like to unpack and understand these terms and evaluate which one(s) makes the most sense for my individual research purposes. It also occurred to me that a discussion of the role that Cuban American women played in the establishment of the enclave in New York is virtually absent in the literature. Focusing on women like Machito’s sister Graciela and exploring further one of the key figures in the governance of the Club Cubano Interamericano, Melba Alvarado, would contribute substantially to the story by adding new, diverse actors. Another underexplored topic is religion and its role in facilitating or obstructing Cubans’ adaptation to life in the city. Was religion a significant part of their self-identification or of the way others saw them as a group? Did most of them identify with Catholicism? If not, did they take advantage of the diversity of religious options that New York City had to offer? Finally, it is worth mentioning one of Nancy Mirabal’s criticisms regarding the scholarship. In her opinion, a discussion of how race worked within individual national communities would be a much-needed intervention. Although some of the literature does sporadically hint of that issue, a thorough investigation of the ways in which race

influenced the relationship between white Cubans and Cubans of color in New York and the making and unmaking of a “Cuban American” identity could yield rewarding results.

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