

The Dual Biopolitics in the Cuban Postplantation of Gloria Rolando's *Raíces de mi corazón*

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In this essay, I focus on the “dual” biopolitics in Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando’s docudrama *Raíces de mi corazón* (*Roots of My Heart*, 2001; hereafter *Raíces*) about an antiblack genocide in early twentieth-century Cuba. Foremost a recovery of the suppressed 1912 racial massacre of members of the Afro-Cuban Partido Independiente de Color (Independent Party of Color, PIC) and two to six thousand other Afro-Cubans, Rolando’s film layers different temporalities to challenge the myth of racial equality throughout Cuba’s modern history. Against this backdrop, I argue that *Raíces* celebrates Afro-Cuban traditions, from orisha rituals to *patakies* (Afro-Cuban oral tradition), in the space of the intimate to then grow this intimate space and promote a message of racial contestation against negative biopolitical forms.¹ One of few black filmmakers of her generation, Rolando indirectly challenges Michel Foucault’s original conceptualization of biopolitics, in which gendered, ethnic, national subjects did not enter, neglecting the roots of biopolitical racism.² In Alexander Weheliye’s terms, “Bare life and biopolitics discourse not only misconstrues how profoundly race and racism shape the modern idea of the human, it

1 As developed by Michel Foucault, *biopolitics* is “the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques.” Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1976), 141–42.

2 See Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 59.

also overlooks or perfunctorily writes off theorizations of race, subjection, and humanity.”³ Thus, these structures of power, from coloniality to US imperialism to the beginning of the neoliberal era, subjugate black life precisely because of the structures of power that regulated humanity on the basis of race. Responding to a moment of racialized political repression in Cuba, Rolando’s film casts a black sensuality over such biopolitical violence.

The sensual relationship of a PIC member with his lover and the space of the intimate in which it unfolds on-screen generate a new kind of freedom, lifting the racialized human spirit over systemic confinement. For Rolando, Cuba exists as this confined space or “postplantation,” what Gwen Bergner acknowledge as a “form, logic, and technology” that belies a post-racial society by exhibiting the necropolitical or biopolitical iterations of the plantational regime well after slavery’s abolition.⁴ But the postplantation also allows us to uncover black resistance toward this biopolitical system. For Rolando, Cuba exists as postplantation because, as a quintessential plantocracy in the nineteenth century, this oppressional space—in which the subsequent iterations of plantational violence against black bodies ensue postslavery—also becomes the stage for black self-determination in ways other than through sheer force. The afterlife of the Cuban plantocratic regime is, after all, precisely the many iterations precluding Afro-Cuban liberation that in the end, Rolando’s film contests through the *affectual* biopolitics of the personal. Before identifying the affectual that constitutes the dual biopolitical strategy in Rolando’s work, I turn first to the historical context from which the personal comes into full view on-screen.

Rolando’s docudrama features the tireless journalist Mercedes, who finds out about her ancestors’ role in the derisively termed “guerrita de los negros” (“little war of the blacks”) or the 1912 genocide. During her investigation of another topic, Mercedes stumbles upon this terribly violent chapter in Cuba’s early republic, curiously obliterated from national history. But one of the film’s most original features is that it uses the space of the home and the realm of dreams as vehicles for Mercedes to visualize the Cuban state’s repression of the 1912 massacre. Following the 1898 Spanish-American War, in which Cuba became a protectorate of the United States, Afro-Cuban veterans of the revolutionary army—termed *mambí*—protested the ensuing segregation, prejudice, and even state denial of their contribution to Cuba’s independence. Inspired by the legacy of Afro-Cuban generals Antonio Maceo and Quintin Banderas, Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonet founded the Partido Independiente de Color in 1908 to demand rights previously guaranteed by the independent republic. But the PIC was a threat to both post-Reconstruction US interests and the white Cuban establishment. As a result, Aline Helg explains, the PIC was “met with a barrage of mockery, false accusations, and repression”⁵ as

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ Gwen Bergner, introduction to Gwen Bergner and Zita Cristina Nunes, eds., “The Plantation, the Postplantation, and the Afterlives of Slavery,” special issue, *American Literature* 91, no. 3 (2019): 447.

⁵ Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 162.

well as a growing discourse of fear regarding black Cubans' Yoruba-derived religion, which I detail later. Among those opposed to black civil rights organizations was Cuba's first black senate president, Martín Morúa Delgado, who had spent the war for Cuban independence in exile in the United States. Exemplifying his position was the Morúa Amendment of 1909, which banned black political parties on the grounds that they were discriminatory against whites.⁶ The fact that the architect of the amendment was an Afro-Cuban served to further spread the rumors that the PIC was naive and antiwhite. Morúa would die before he could witness the genocide that indirectly ensued from this political ruling. This is because, in February 1912, Estenoz presented President José Miguel Gomez with an ultimatum: revoke the Morúa Amendment that rendered the PIC illegitimate or face armed protest. As these pleas were ignored, the PIC took to the streets on the anniversary of Cuba's independence, 20 May 1912, but mobilized a raceless Cuba Libre discourse of the early republic. This protest was distorted and sensationalized as an antiwhite war. As constitutional guarantees were suspended on 5 June, the Cuban army marched into the eastern province of Oriente (the eastern part of the island where the PIC was founded), murdering PIC members along with thousands of other Afro-Cubans. The "guerrita de los negros" or race war "put a definitive end to the Partido Independiente de Color and made clear to all Afro-Cubans that any further attempt to challenge the social order would be crushed with bloodshed."⁷

In the film, scenes of genocidal murder become poignant in Mercedes's dream. But this space of the private—a dream activated by objects of orisha adoration in her home—facilitates the emergence of two griots (female and male) who recount through oral tradition the various ways black agency in Cuba has been repressed. As the docudrama's temporality shifts into a layered time period combining colonial slavery, the days of the Cuban Republic, and a post-Cold War era, the film also seems to suggest a burying of black agency that is only recovered in the intimate space. Most important, the film underscores the ways antiblack prejudices inherited from Cuba's colonial plantocracy only become more pronounced as the newfound "Cuba Libre" denies its blackness despite the fact that the mambí force constituted 60 to 80 percent of the Liberation Army.⁸ The denial of the mambí's pivotal role during insurrections in both 1868–78 and 1895–98 was due in part to the racist apprehension that Cuba would replicate a black Haitian Republic even prior to independence. As Ada Ferrer explains, when the sugar plantation economy shifted from Haiti to Cuba following the 1791 Haitian Revolution, the black population outnumbering the white in Cuba triggered Cuban white creole fears of emulating Haiti's fate.⁹ Cuban insurgents thus endorsed José Martí's notion of racial mixing, making Cuba's multiracial society unprecedented in the hemisphere during an era of scientific racism and a US Jim Crow. Nevertheless, the myth of racial equality born from the idea of mixed races did little to improve

6 Ibid., 165.

7 Ibid., 194.

8 Ricardo Batrell and Mark A. Sanders, *A Black Soldier's Story: The Narrative of Ricardo Batrell and the Cuban War of Independence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xi.

9 Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 2.

Afro-Cuban conditions after the US takeover of the island. Instead of promoting sovereignty, the United States fueled black disenfranchisement. As Mark Sanders explains, the United States exported (and continues to export) a post-Reconstruction model of democracy that promotes white hegemony over black economic devastation.¹⁰ Moreover, the Platt Amendment—which stipulated that the United States would intervene if its interests were threatened—pressured white Cuban leaders to underscore the “refinement, civility and whiteness” of the Cuban population.¹¹ This white supremacist model implemented in Cuba not only catalyzed racial segregation but also perpetuated racist attitudes that questioned the appropriateness of black citizenship. It did so, for instance, through the Cuban artistic staple of *teatro bufo* (burlesque blackface), which ridiculed the stereotypical forms of blackness in Cuban society. As Jill Lane explains, *teatro bufo*, commonplace during the colonial establishment, exacerbated prejudices forming the basis for the denial of black self-rule.¹² As US capital investment intensified, white Cuban leaders betrayed their black counterparts, precluding Afro-Cubans’ upward social mobility, the consequences of which Rolando traces to her present moment.

While anglophone critical race theory postulations such as those of Weheliye or Sylvia Wynter help us understand the ways Rolando contests the Cuban myth of racial equality informed by US intervention, the island’s racial paradox as underscored in the film subtly critiques Cuban state violence against Afro-Cubans specifically, a violence rooted in the myth of a raceless state. Rolando’s contestation of this myth in the film dialogues with what Mark Sawyer terms a Latin America–focused “inclusionary discrimination,” a system that adopts people of color into the idealization of the nation but does not preclude racism or discrimination against that population.¹³ In fact, challenging the notion that Latin American racial politics are distinct from or even “better” than those in the United States, Sawyer critiques the prevalence of a “Latin American exceptionalism” by which the myth of racial democracy in the Southern Hemisphere insists that racism has been resolved by virtue of “race mixing or incomplete segregation.”¹⁴ Socialist exceptionalism (the ideology that sees the destabilization of economic inequality as the solution for racism and discrimination) in turn perpetuated the myth of racial equality in a postrevolutionary Cuba, despite violent repression of Afro-Cuban expression, including religion. Because this racial equality myth plagues Cuba from the pre- to the post-Revolution that *Raíces* traces, the myriad manifestations of anti-Afro-Cuban exclusion begin and end, for Rolando’s protagonist, with the realization that the 1912 genocide claimed her previously unknown great-great-grandfather.

Returning to the case of affirmative biopolitics with which I will conclude this essay, it is significant that in Mercedes’s dreamscape, she discerns not only a familial tie to one of the assassinated black leaders but also his secretive and sensual relationship with her

10 Batrell and Sanders, *A Black Soldier's Story*, xxxi.

11 Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*, 191.

12 Jill Lane, *Blackface Cuba, 1840–1895* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 72.

13 Mark Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-revolutionary Cuba* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19.

14 *Ibid.*, 22.

great-great-grandmother. It is precisely in this scene in her dream, recurrently juxtaposed with scenes of violence, that Rolando celebrates a black sensuality that transcends the violent necropolitics of Cuban history throughout the ages. While I revisit the ways the film uses Afro-Cuban religious and oral forms to evoke what Michel-Rolph Trouillot terms a silenced history, I also problematize the biopolitics of three different racial necropolitical eras: slavery, the 1912 genocide, and the repression of Afro-Cuban expression in the postrevolutionary era.¹⁵ To do so, I read this film as presenting a case for a dual biopolitics that emphasizes the space of black sensuality as an answer to Weheliye's query: "Why are formations of the oppressed deemed liberatory only if they resist hegemony and/or exhibit the full agency of the oppressed?"¹⁶ As I will discuss at the end of this essay, in Rolando's seminal film, both negative (violent) and affirmative (or affective) biopolitics reiterate the limits of a postplantation imaginary that contrasts the destructive with regenerative capabilities. I am specifically interested in scenes that cut from the violent to the sensual. What concerns this moment in the film are the ways the spiritual and the sensual overcome systematic and almost complete annihilation of the plantational order, colonial or contemporary. If spaces of terror transform subjects "into flesh before being granted the illusion of possessing a body," Rolando redeems the captivity of flesh to a body with desire, and simultaneously from a plantational system to a reappropriated postplantation where bare life resides.¹⁷ This life manipulates the sociopolitical environment in which such bodies had been violently restrained, brutalized, tortured, and maimed in the postplantational space of biopolitics. The traumatic history is so understudied that the film daringly places the marginalized historical marker front and center, but it does so through equally marginalized techniques. I begin this analysis with the realm of the spiritual in the oneiric space that Rolando constructs within Mercedes's home.

Biopolitics in the Private Space: Spirituality and Oral Tradition

Relatively few critics have written about Rolando's celebrated film. Alejandro de la Fuente has argued that the film traces the persistence of racism in Cuba, from the earlier Republican to the postrevolutionary era and continuing well into the 1990s "special period" (the economic depression, officially termed the "periodo especial en tiempos de paz," after the collapse of the Soviet Union). Flora González Mandri has focused on the female agency of the protagonist Mercedes as both revising myths of national identity and recovering the centrality of Yoruba deities. Finally, Sonja Watson has read the film as a prototypical example in pedagogy to contest the obliteration of Afro-Hispanic voices in the Americas. Expanding from these scholars, I offer that Rolando's film uses the realm of the spiritual as an archival source of recovery. Defying a long tradition of Afro-Cuban criminalization and oppression, Rolando centralizes the role of *la*

15 See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995, 2015).

16 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 2.

17 *Ibid.*, 39.

regla de ocha or *lucumí* as a means of activating memories lost to history. Reading Rolando's film through the lens of the spiritual, this section focuses on the ways spirituality within the space of the private creates hegemonic historical contestation, both modern and contemporary.

Raíces opens with journalist Mercedes's request to write a story on the role of black women in Cuba. Her editor, however, discourages the topic, responding, "Ese tema no nos conviene por ahora," and a disheartened Mercedes returns home.¹⁸ The editor's disparaging of Afro-diasporic inquiry as irrelevant clearly anchors the documentary to the racial disparity of the special period. To alleviate the economic depression of the early 1990s, Cuba turned to tourism and regressed to its pre-revolutionary segregatory practices. Most important, the legalization of dollars and remittances disproportionately affected Afro-Cubans, who were discriminated against and denied employment in the most lucrative sector of the Cuban economy but who also, compared to their white peers, received far fewer remittances from abroad due to the racial composition of the Cuban diaspora.¹⁹ As the racial economic imbalance in Havana becomes prominent, the editor manages these racial tensions by rebuffing Mercedes's quite relevant topic.

Mercedes nonetheless pursues her interests, and during her investigation at the Biblioteca Nacional de José Martí, she finds traces of a racial genocide that only reveals itself fully when she returns home and sleeps. To be noted with regard to this private space is that because Havana was an archetypal plantocracy in the nineteenth century, the former plantation space that is Mercedes's home ignites the silenced memory of the early-twentieth-century biopolitical genocide. What shapes the development of Rolando's work as a postplantation imaginary is precisely the history of Cuba's plantation regime only abolished in 1886.²⁰ Significant to Cuba's plantocratic past was the *palenque* or *monte*—a community of runaway slaves—that facilitated the retention or recovery of cultural memory. As if echoing this space, it is Mercedes's home that invigorates her quest to recover the 1912 biopolitical genocide that she suspects the Cuban state has obliterated. This is mainly because the objects within this private space transform it into a "shelter," akin to spatial theorist Yi-Fu Tuan's definition of the term as a space personalized by objects.²¹ A palenque-like shelter of Yoruba-derived traditions constitutes Mercedes's private abode, which features Carla Nickerson's famous *Senegalese Woman* (1997), whose robe Mercedes mirrors and wears; Belkis Ayón's untitled *Sikán* (1993); and Eduardo "Choco" Roca's *Rostro* (*Face*, 1997). As the camera pans across these paintings and other orisha-derived artifacts and photographs, a nondiegetic *danzón* celebrating these mostly female mythic figures is not

18 "That topic is not in our best interests right now"; *Raíces de mi corazón*, dir. Gloria Rolando, *Imágenes del Caribe*, 2001. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

19 Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 319.

20 Before the trade's protracted end, Cuba was one of the last former colonies to abolish slavery in 1886. Cuba had been Spain's most profitable colony in the nineteenth century, producing \$58 million in profits between 1821 and 1867. Lisa Surwillo, *Monsters by Trade: Slave Traffickers in Modern Spanish Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 3.

21 The "objects and places that define space," for Tuan, reconstitute a place that "acquires definition and meaning" based on the objects that transform said space into a "shelter." Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 136–37.

accidental. Ayón's Sikán, a female sacrificial lamb of the Abakúa religion, is certainly central to celebrating Afro-female agency in the face of both state and male-centered oppression. After all, Sikán's body was violently desecrated for divulging the Efor people's myth of origin to their rivals, the Efik, prompting war.²² Ayón's feminist collagraph seeks to celebrate Sikán in the face of this Eve-like origin of sin that the all-male Abakúa Secret Society perpetuates. Following suit, Rolando's filmic focus on both the mythic Sikán and Nickerson's Senegalese boubou defy cultural authorities' containment of racial issues.²³ If memory of the black Cuban body is shuttered from public view, Mercedes's private dwelling serves as a space to emphasize an affirmation of that body's presence and in turn activate her will to seek a black transnational truth. Indeed, by portraying how "black professionals of today have their own history—a history that is itself poorly known," de la Fuente shows that "the documentary recovers through a quick visual tour of family photographs and images of properly dressed, middle-class looking, dignified black men and women."²⁴ The objects within the heritage museum that is Mercedes's home operate as vehicles that amplify the celebration of black autonomous bodies within the private but self-affirming space. And indeed, as amplifications, the film's privileging of these objects within the private space underscores the power of a silenced history or what Trouillot terms a history rendered "a non-event" due to its threat to a white hegemony.²⁵ In Rolando's case, this silenced past is obtained through the realm of the spiritual, nuancing a biopolitical racialization that is absent in the very concept of Foucauldian biopolitics.

Mercedes's personal surroundings ignite the recovery of the genocide, as the spiritual travels through the body to fill in the voids that an authoritarian regime obliterated, thus running contrary to biopolitical conceptions of Western episteme. After all, in Foucault's analysis of biopolitics, he underscores the need to "desacralize" spaces of crisis.²⁶ Because the realm of the spiritual cannot be explained by a Western conceptualization of the scientific, Wynter explains, the occidentalist study of biopolitics has turned against an inclusion of the spiritual. In what she terms a "degodding of its descriptive statement of the human," religiosity as opposed to the scientific—especially a religiosity espoused by communities of color—would hardly warrant serious study, as theorist M. Jacqui Alexander has also lamented.²⁷ This reversion to secular analysis of biopolitics (and science) further removes its application to the black subject, or in Weheliye's words, black subjects "serve as limit cases by which Man can demarcate himself as the universal human."²⁸ Moreover, any permutation outside of what science could explain

22 See Lydia Cabrera, *La lengua sagrada de los ñāñigos* (Miami: Ediciones CR, 1988), 168–72.

23 De la Fuente explains that in regard to Rolando's film, this silencing of the past "is reproduced in the present, as exemplified by the refusal of (white) cultural authorities to investigate topics that concern the history of black Cubans." De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 208.

24 Ibid.

25 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 98.

26 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1967): 4.

27 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *New Centennial Review* 3 (2003): 281. Similarly, M. Jacqui Alexander states that "no self-respecting postmodernist would want to align herself (at least in public) with a category such as the spiritual." M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 15.

28 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 25.

signifies the Other in opposition to rationality.²⁹ Thus, it was in overlooking the episteme of race that Foucault *also* minimized the place of spirituality, delegitimizing the sacred.

Ironically, it is precisely Foucault's spaces of crisis that Rolando's intimate home seeks to probe: both the reappropriated plantational space and the spaces of black Cuban annihilation that the government has swept under the rug. Not only do the objects that speak to Afro-Cuban affirmation help shape Mercedes's subjectivity, but the intimate setting of her home constituted by traditional West African garments, ethnic pride, and spirituality also charges the rituals of the *regla de ocha* or *lucumí*, which in turn activate her dream. In the film, when smoke exits from a scepter, a breeze undulates around a dream catcher, and candles illuminate the photographs of several of Mercedes's ancestors, the camera then focuses on a female griot. González Mandri terms this scene an apparition of an "African woman who may represent a combination of Yenmayá, . . . of Ochún . . . and Oyá."³⁰ Through ritualistic dance, this African woman eventually places the subconscious version of Mercedes at the oceanic coasts and origin of the African diaspora (fig. 1), as if connecting the silenced twentieth-century massacre to the Middle Passage.

The woman, released from hegemonic referentiality, brings Mercedes to the realm of the oral. Once again recalling Trouillot—who explains that literacy precludes access to historicization for the illiterate³¹—in *Raíces*, the manifestation of the oral archive intervenes to fill in the gap of silence. In Mercedes's dream, the woman griot guides her back across the Atlantic and places her in the care of a second griot, whom Rolando terms the *espíritu de la noche* (spirit of night). As the camera focuses on a doubled-faced sculpture in Mercedes's home, this object seems to summon the male *espíritu de la noche*—dressed as a former runaway slave—who then provides an allegory found in Afro-Cuban oral tradition termed *patakíes* (fig. 2). This old man proceeds to recount the *patakí* regarding the myth of *las dos caras* (two faces):

Del silencio cae el olvido. El olvido y el silencio juntos: muerte. Pasa el tiempo, todo sería como si nada hubiera pasado. Pero pasaron muchas cosas. Las apariencias no es la verdad. Lo que tú ves es parte de lo que es, pero no todo lo que es. *Las cosas tienen dos caras*. Tú miras desde el sur, el otro desde el norte. Y ambos han visto parte de la realidad. Por eso, trata de encontrar tu voz interior. Escucha lo que te dicen *las raíces de tu corazón*.³²

(From silence comes obscurity. Obscurity and silence together: Death. Time passes and it is as if nothing had happened. But many things occurred. Appearances are not the truth. What you see is only part of what is, but not everything that is. *Things have two faces*. You observe from the south, another from the north. So both of you have seen part of reality. For that reason, attempt to find your inner voice. Listen what *the roots of your heart* tell you.)

The griot who appears in Mercedes's dream here embodies both sides of the coin. He is aware of the state's dictated historiography but decolonizes this version of events to reveal history from

29 Wynter, "Unsettling," 281–82.

30 Flora González Mandri, *Guarding Cultural Memory: Afro-Cuban Women in Literature and the Arts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 95.

31 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 55.

32 Rolando, *Raíces* (emphasis mine).



Figure 1. Movie still from Gloria Rolando's docu-drama *Raíces de mi corazón*, 2001, in which a female griot guides Mercedes in her dream.

a different angle: “Things have two faces.” The myth in fact appears first in renowned Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s 1976 *La última cena* (*The Last Supper*), in which a marooned slave leader recounts that the god Olofi created the Truth and the Lie but exchanged their identities and created confusion.³³ This myth of Yoruba creation is reminiscent of Rolando’s *cimarrón* in that history has two versions. In the case of *Raíces*, national history can also be told through the conventions of the periphery of the oral patakí and relayed through a spiritual dimension.

As is evident from this scene, not only does the film take its title, *Raíces*, from the emblematic wisdom rooted in the patakí shared during the era of the slave trade, but Rolando also uses African diasporic mythology to mediate between official Cuban history and repressed collective memory. The griot’s discourse rescues the tales from prominent ethnologist Rogelio

33 Based on *El ingenio* by Cuban historian Manuel Moreno, Gutiérrez Alea’s neo-baroque *La última cena* mostly memorializes the insurrection of slaves in the southern-end province of Cuba in the eighteenth century, led by the commander of the Gran Palenque de Moa with over three hundred escaped slaves. In the film, prior to this insurrection, twelve slaves are invited to dine at the master’s table. After the Eucharist, the master falls asleep and the *cimarrón* (runaway slave) Sebastián tells the other slaves about how Truth and Lie decapitated each other and proceeded to wear one another’s head, confusing the masses.



Figure 2. Movie still from Gloria Rolando's *Raíces de mi corazón*, 2001, featuring el "espíritu de la noche" or male griot.

Martínez Furé's 1979 *Diálogos imaginarios (Imaginary Dialogues)* and Teodoro Díaz Fabelo's 1983 *Cincuenta y un patakies afroamericanos (Fifty-One African American Patakies)*. In turn, these transcribed oral traditions are subsequently inscribed into the film. Rolando projects them into the realm of the oneiric and thus unsettles national standards of historical memory. If Édouard Glissant theorizes that the silenced plantation subjects re-signified identity through the preservation of traditions over a charged space, they did so through oral expression termed "oralitures" — or patakí, in Rolando's case — as "an oralization of the written" as contestation.³⁴

In this way, *Raíces* intercepts the powers wielding historical production through the oral archive dictated to Mercedes in her dream, as well as their production within the confines of the repossessed former plantocracy that was Cuba. The aims of the film are thus not unlike Trouillot's "turn toward hitherto neglected sources (diaries, images, bodies) and the emphasis on unused facts (facts of gender, race, and class, facts of the life cycle, facts of resistance)"

³⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 245.

to dislocate nationalistic and occidental constructions of historical records.³⁵ Mercedes's private space functions as such a "neglected" archive, one previously used to enforce violence against bare life that now enables spirituality and orality to collectively retell this biopolitical story against the national version. Rolando's decolonizing process here affirms what Paul Ricoeur states are private spaces that "function for the most part after the manner of reminders, offering internal support for failing memory."³⁶ Not only does Mercedes's spiritually inhabited home promote Afro-diasporic memory in the face of failing memory, but it also enables her to break away from nationalist discourse to forge an understanding of her roots through the enclosed spaces of the private.

To summarize, the ritualized and intimate space turns the former plantational space into a subaltern shelter or palenque that activates memory through the realm of the spiritual and the oral in Mercedes's unconscious. During this time, the intervention of female and male griots leads her to discover the truth about the underemphasized genocide, but it then turns to do so through quite personal attachments. In what follows, I present the case of Rolando's negative biopolitics and the film's journey through a layered Cuban history in which the plantational regime not only echoes forms of black spiritual criminalization but also uses them to repeatedly justify the annihilation of the black body in the case of the 1912 genocide. As I will explain at the end of this analysis, *Raíces* seeks to challenge both the transmission of Jim Crow during the US occupation of Cuba and the ideology of what Sawyer terms "Latin American exceptionalism," which denies blackness from Cuba's early independent era to postrevolutionary times.

Plantational Genocide and Negative Biopolitics

The negative biopolitics that Rolando traces throughout Cuban black history begins with the colonial period for two reasons. First, the "plantational" effect of this postplantation that is Mercedes's intimate space reveals the haunting legacy of colonial biopolitics, or what Achille Mbembe has famously termed a "negative moment" of "necropolitics" reflected in the fact that "antagonisms emerge while old ones remain unresolved."³⁷ Mercedes's preclusion from publishing a story on black women is as much related to Cuba's 1990s antiblack policies as it is to keenly unresolved "negative" biopolitics engendered through the subjectivity of the human through "the violence of negativity" of Cuba's colonial past.³⁸ But second, the colonial period is precisely the era that launches Mercedes into the revelation of the PIC's demise, as the male griot revealed his family to be "rooted" in slavery. In this way, Mercedes's abode

35 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 49.

36 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 41.

37 Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive," *Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research*, 2015, n.p.

38 Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 14.

functions as a postplantation site of memory that reflects on the insidious structural form of coloniality that repeats itself beyond the colonial era: from structures of Jim Crow in the United States to the neoliberal necropolitics of the carceral state. And yet, the postplantation era is not simply a “map[ping of] the plantation’s form onto all contemporary forms of racial injustice,” and much less a determining marker for signifying blackness (politically or otherwise).³⁹ Rather, it serves as a point of reference to question the very colonial origins of this structural form, and apply racial solidarities across a Global South. Sharing a global history of antiblack repression, Rolando focuses on Cuba’s racial politics by considering not only the US-Cuban transnational effects on the black body following 1898—and the active persecution of Afro-Cuban religion, as I explain—but the paradoxical perception of Cuba as a raceless republic (both during Cuba Libre’s beginning and after the Cuban Revolution), an ideology that further disposes of the black body, literally and figuratively.

To revisit the 1912 massacre as a most extreme form of violent black dispossession, *Raíces* uses unresolved negative moments within Mercedes’s postplantational space to focus on the cimarrón-turned-mambí.⁴⁰ The storyteller cimarrón who invoked the patakí reveals he later became a mambí soldier, serving to revise Esteban Montejo and Miguel Barnet’s *Biografía de un cimarrón* (*Biography of a Runaway Slave*), a postrevolutionary nationalist text published in 1966 that silences the history of 1912:

Mis padres eran africanos y los convirtieron en esclavos. Se ganaron la libertad aquí en el monte. Por eso, yo nací libre. De niño, de joven, nunca tuve por techo ó cobija otra cosa que no fuera la sombra de los árboles ó el escondite de la cueva. Y peleé muy duro, peleamos blancos y negros. Yo también quería ver a Cuba libre de España. Libre también de ese desprecio que miraban mi piel oscura. ¿Y que teníamos la República? Promesas, promesas que nunca se convertían en realidad. Por eso los cubanos sentíamos todavía la sangre agitada por la pólvora de la Guerra, teníamos que seguir luchando. No había otra salida.⁴¹

(My parents were Africans and were turned into slaves. They gained freedom here in the *monte*. That is why I was born free. As a boy, as a teen, I never had any other refuge but the shadows of trees or the hideout of a cave. And I fought very hard, we fought blacks and whites. I also wanted to see Cuba free of the Spanish. Free also of that scorn toward my dark skin. And what did we have with the Republic? Promises, promises that were never fulfilled. That is why we Cubans still felt the agitation of gunpowder in our blood. We had to keep fighting. There was no alternative.)

The griot-turned-insurrectionist notably alludes to Esteban Montejo, a descendant of Maroon slaves and oral storyteller, but also a former mambí of the Liberation Army during the Spanish-American War. While Esteban Montejo, and later Roberto Fernández Retamar, rescues the term *mambí* from its derogatory Spanish origin (as the Spanish Army applied the term

39 Gwen Bergner, “Introduction: The Plantation, the Postplantation, and the Afterlives of Slavery,” *American Literature* 91, no. 3 (2019): 447.

40 For a further development of this term, see my *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*, forthcoming in the Cambridge Studies in World Literature and Culture series from Cambridge University Press.

41 Rolando, *Raíces*.

initially to the perceived violence of black insurrectionists), Rolando here decisively valorizes the role of Afro-Cubans in Cuban independence through this male griot who narrates his own story. Tracing a through line from slavery to Cuban independence, Rolando's oral informant within a palenque memorializes his struggle in "I fought very hard," applicable as much to the colonial days as it is to the early twentieth century that he is likely referring to. Moreover, as he fights to assuage "that scorn toward my dark skin," this racialization connects slavery's color line to the transnational obliteration of the PIC. Recalling the orisha manifestation that induces Mercedes's memory of the PIC, what is daring about *Raíces* is the realm of the spiritual it overemphasizes. This is because Afro-Cuban religiosity was precisely what was persecuted and vilified in prerevolutionary Cuba, which in turn helped justify that "scorn" toward Afro-Cubans and the PIC massacre.

As a former plantocracy, Cuba's colonial afterlife informs many of the continuities of racialization that will plague the new Cuban republic at the turn of the twentieth century. During the Republican era, the Cuban government actively persecuted, stigmatized, and criminalized Afro-Cuban religious practitioners. In fact, archival records show that rituals were interrupted, practitioners arrested, and objects confiscated by the state, evoking the plantational era. As Stephan Palmié argues, from 1902 to the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, "social and legal reformers aiming to construe manifestations of Afro-Cuban religious activity into incriminable offenses were chafing under the legacies of long-standing colonial persecutory practices."⁴² One of these colonial legends was the fear of the black brujo, not unlike the fear inspired by Vodou in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Haiti. It also did not help that many Yoruba *lucumí* gods, such as the warrior orisha Oggún, conjured slave insurrections.⁴³ Sensationalized in media, these feared black brujos were represented in ways still similar to the popular rendering of the cannibalistic, grave-digging zombies.⁴⁴ Epitomic of a simultaneous attraction and horror with the black brujos was precisely Fernando Ortiz's *Hampa afro-cubana: Los negros brujos (Afro-Cuban Underworld: The Black Witch Doctors)*. Immersed in positivist theories of inferiority spread by Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso and American anthropologist Franz Boas, Ortiz's 1906 *Black Witch Doctors* is also influenced by theories of criminal behavior he learned as a student in Madrid (and not Cuba), and written with an initially scarce knowledge of Afro-Cuban religions.⁴⁵ Although, as Emily Maguire notes, Ortiz's later work—like that of his sister-in-law Lydia Cabrera—envisioned the African elements as directly constituted in a nationalist Cuban ethos, Ortiz's earlier text proposed the decoupling of the African portion from Cuban identity if the island was to achieve a desired occidentalist civilization.⁴⁶ Despite

42 Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 30.

43 Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal, "The Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion in Contemporary Cuban Cinema," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 13, no. 1 (1994): 18.

44 Sarah Quesada, "A Planetary Warning? The Multilayered Zombie in "Monstro," in Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldivar, eds., *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 307–9.

45 Edward Mullen, *Afro-Cuban Literature: Critical Junctures* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), 96.

46 Emily Maguire, *Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature and Ethnography* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 31.

the eventual celebration of the works of Cabrera and Ortiz, blackness was synonymous with primitivism for a postindependence and imperialist Cuba, and thus contrary to development. This positionality, Maguire explains, “hints at a continued anxiety, at a fear of the divisive power of race” further aggravated by the US promotion of Jim Crow racist ideology.⁴⁷ Ultimately, this fear manifested in the biopolitical criminalizing of black bodies, in which Afro-Cubans become criminalized even for practicing their faith.⁴⁸ If “slavery conjures a different form of bare life . . . the purging of all citizenship rights from slaves save their mere life,” the film now moves to reimagine slavery’s haunting continuity in the genocide.⁴⁹

Raíces connects the plantocracy to Cuba’s selective national history. In Rolando’s film, the oneiric griots belie the assertion of national (and racial) sovereignty as *Raíces* depicts biopolitical state violence, accentuating “inequalities experienced by the actors [that] lead to uneven historical power in the inscription of traces.”⁵⁰ The camera now leaves the interior for the exterior to pan across members of the PIC dressed in white and gathering in a plaza. The film counters these images with photos of bodies piled high, sounds of gunshots, and the weeping of sorrowful women. Collages of obscure newspaper clippings portraying the violence cut to scenes of lifeless bodies interspersed with fog and smoke. The Afro-Cubans are ultimately vanquished in the battle, as their physical bodies lose their life and their ideological bodies remain defeated in their right to exist throughout history.

The historical event reproduces biopolitical racial justification in that, as Foucault explains, “racism justifies the death-function in the economy of biopower.”⁵¹ For Cuba, the application of this critique is manifested in the execution of violence as justification for the means for production within an imperialistically governed nation. *Raíces* denounces the state’s rendering of the genocide as just as marginal as the place where it occurred, and its minimization of the butchery by designating the event as a “guerrita de negros.” The condescending term *guerrita* not only lessens the terror of racialized violence but also assigns blame to the PIC, deeming the war as “theirs” (“guerrita de negros,” or “war of the blacks”). Originating in the plantocracy, this undervalorization “reveals the manifold modes in which extreme brutality and directed killing *frequently and peacefully coexist with other forms of coercion* and noncoercion within the scope of the normal juridico-political order.”⁵² With the abolition of slavery having occurred fewer than thirty years before the 1912 genocide, this “coercion” of black life coexists with the “juridico-political” means of law and order. The genocide manifests a necropolitics that confines Cuba to its former colonial status.⁵³

47 Ibid., 10. Maguire notes that “thanks in part to the American occupation of the island, North American Jim Crow policies and accompanying racist stereotypes had entered Cuban practice and speech” (ibid.).

48 Ibid., 47.

49 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 37–38.

50 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48.

51 Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: St. Martin’s, 2003), 258. See Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 56.

52 Ibid., 37 (emphasis mine).

53 Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 23.

If critical race theory is useful in reading the negative biopolitical effects that *Raíces* evinces, Cuban racial politics focalize the complexities with which the film grapples. While a US imperial takeover certainly undergirds the criminalization of Yoruba-derived religiosity in prerevolutionary Cuba that *Raíces* confronts, Rolando reconstructs the ways the Cuban Republic itself, drawing from coloniality, rationalized the genocide. Recalling prerevolutionary Cuba Libre's reluctance to see blackness constituted in Cuban nationality—and prescient of Fidel Castro's socialist exceptionalism, which I will return to—*Raíces* depicts the ways the new Cuban Republic painted black political empowerment as antinational, thus justifying a violent repression of what the state deemed a racist war. As the camera pans over newspaper clippings, a voice-over validates the government's biopolitical terror: “Ha terminado la convulsión racista. Sea en hora buena. Celebremos el fin, aunque no hayamos estado conforme con los medios. Contribuyamos a echar tierra sobre un asunto tan desagradable, dejando a un lado la responsabilidad enorme contraída por el gobierno en esa página sangrienta.”⁵⁴ Although there is a sense of responsibility in the media's publication (“the enormous responsibility incurred by the government”), the ruling class conveniently underwrites it, to “bury such an unpleasant affair.” The end justifies the means, and the urgency of “development” validates violence as a “means of disposing of the enemies of the state.”⁵⁵

What followed in Cuba after 1912 was a flood of “simplistic negative caricatures” based on traditional stereotypes infused with the notion that an imagined “black barbarism” thwarted republican advancement.⁵⁶ The black liberators were pictured as absurd or quixotic soldiers with made-up exotic features. Although based on a fear of black reprisal, the caricatures focused on supposed African religions—inherited from slavery—as ludicrous and contrary to the ideals of the new republic.

In Rolando's film, this genealogy connects to the postrevolutionary state, in which Castro promised racial equality.⁵⁷ However, a few years after this proclamation, in 1962, when Cuba was deemed a racially egalitarian society, a crackdown ensued on both debates regarding racial inequality and religious practice.⁵⁸ As a secular state, the government deemed any Afro-Cuban ritual subversive, not entirely unlike Cuba's prerevolutionary days. Carlos Moore even states that the Revolution actively persecuted not only Afro-Cuban religions but also any of their cultural or artistic manifestations.⁵⁹ It was not until 1986 that Castro's government opened up to discussing the integration (or lack thereof) of Afro-Cuban identity. By then, however, Cuba was headed toward its unprecedented economic downfall. To borrow from

54 “The racist convulsion has ended. May it be celebrated. Let us celebrate the end, even though we have not been in agreement with the means. Let us help bury such an unpleasant affair, leaving behind the enormous responsibility incurred by the government for this bloody chapter”; Rolando, *Raíces*.

55 Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 19.

56 Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, 234.

57 De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 263–67.

58 *Ibid.*, 276–68; Carlos Moore, *Pichón, a Memoir: Race and Revolution in Castro's Cuba* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2008), 24–25.

59 Moore, *Pichón*, 99.

Odette Casamayor-Cisneros, the special period accentuated a tragic sense that Cuba was suspended in time, threatened by economic uncertainty.⁶⁰

In many ways, the effects of this economic collapse weigh heavily on Cuban racial politics well into the new millennium. In 2013, Casa de las Américas intellectual Roberto Zurbano's editorial in the *New York Times* negating Cuba's racial equality myth plunged the state into controversy. In the publication, Zurbano charged that while certainly race continued to determine upward social mobility in Cuba, "the government hasn't allowed racial prejudice to be debated or confronted politically or culturally, often pretending instead as though it didn't exist."⁶¹ The controversy cost Zurbano his position as editor in chief at one of Latin America's most recognized cultural centers, while two special issues of *Cuban Studies* and *Afro-Hispanic Review*, edited by Alejandro de la Fuente and William Luis, respectively, provided forums for debate of the issue by scholars on and off the island. Arguments ranged from faulting the United States for its embargo to blaming Cuba for its plantational regime or even its desperate measures that plunged the black population into unprecedented poverty during the special period. In a retrospective issue over a year later, Zurbano doubled down on his position but pleaded for the Cuban state to produce a serious study regarding the economic disadvantages affecting all Cubans of color, mostly the black community, which suffered "doubly" from "old socioeconomic disadvantages."⁶² As if foretelling Zurbano's final position, Rolando's film challenges this issue before it becomes polemical, and does so in ways as denunciatory as they are reconcilable. In the midst of the special period, I conclude with the creative ways Rolando indeed reconciles centuries-old biopolitical force with forms that reconceptualize resistance to it.

Film as Body: The Sensual as Affectual Biopolitics

While the special period's dire economic crisis cast the existence of racial inequality into sharp relief, paradoxically this time of black hardship returned Afro-Cuban artistic practice to the public view. Rolando's film exemplifies this practice in which the special period catalyzes a push to eradicate racial inequalities akin to the youthful activism of Rolando's peers. For instance, Tanya Saunders sees the special period as an era in which "Black Cuban identity politics were in formation" and from which the Cuban Underground Hip Hop Movement gained notoriety from 1998 to 2006.⁶³ The *Cofradía de la Negritud* similarly formed in 1999 and also aimed to both reveal racial inequality publicly and pressure the government to implement reforms to alleviate it.⁶⁴ In the literary sphere, Casamayor-Cisneros locates a new ethic-aesthetic practice—constituted by those whose work is rarely accessible beyond the island, or censored

60 Odette Casamayor-Cisneros, *Utopía, distopía e ingravidez: Reconfiguraciones cosmológicas en la narrativa postsoviética cubana* (Madrid: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2013), 16.

61 Roberto Zurbano, "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun," *New York Times*, 23 March 2013.

62 Roberto Zurbano, "Cinco minutos de reflexión contra del racismo," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 33, no. 1 (2014): 61.

63 Tanya Saunders, *Cuban Underground Hip Hop: Black Thoughts, Black Revolution, Black Modernity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 8.

64 De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 332.

on it, such as Abel Prieto or Orlando Pardo Lazo—as a means of coming to terms with a new sense of self as an economic system collapses.⁶⁵

For Rolando, the special period stages a denunciation of violent biopolitical episteme throughout Cuba's modern history in *Raíces*, through the oral and spiritual, all while exemplifying black empowerment through an affectual biopolitics. This is because during Mercedes's dream, the camera fades back to a family portrait she owns, taken at the same time as the genocide. A personal touch then colors the transnational conflict when Mercedes visualizes the birth of an illegitimate child. It is revealed that she is the offspring of a sensual and passionate desire between her great-great-grandmother and a member of the PIC. Here, *Raíces* provides ways of remembering the 1912 genocide through the vehicle of the body in the intimate. The fact that it is precisely *film* that projects this affectual biopolitics underscores the role of the "body," both materially and ideologically. Materially because while the film is initially textual by way of its script, its form is also "textual" in terms of its material quality as *texture*. *Film*'s original meaning in Greek was corporeal, since *film* or *filmen* meant "membrane" or "skin." That is, film was expressed as a coating of the body in a protective layer. As a representational external entity, for centuries, that "film" was used for artistic expression through modifications, tinted, or tattooed. Adjusting its meaning to modern times, *film* evolved to mean a flexible strip coated with colors and objects to reproduce *amplified* motion pictures or photographs.

If we understand film as a body on whose surface we amplify ideological memory—text—Rolando's docudrama also amplifies the corporeal meaning of its (con)text through the affectual sensuality of Mercedes's ancestors. In one of the most erotic scenes Rolando has produced in her forty-year career, the encounter between Mercedes's great-great-grandparents, José Julián and María Victoria, memorializes the PIC conflict. The film's rendering of the 1912 genocide and its horrific violence contrasts sharply with the couple's romance, moments before José Julián leaves to join the PIC in Oriente. Enabled by the application of shadows and low contrast, the violence is washed out while the camera underscores, instead, the scenes of romance.

In this sequence, a long shot initiates the sensuality in which an enduring love affair features María Victoria reading José Julián's letter. The *mise-en-scène* sets on María Victoria reading on the porch of a revived Queen Anne home, with a mix of diegetic music and nondiegetic narrative that reproduces the contents of José Julián's letter. The voice-over reveals José Julián's incarceration and his subsequent release, as he then vows to marry María Victoria once the PIC is able to free Afro-Cubans from inequality. From this moment, the camera cross-cuts between scenes of violence and the couple's love affair. One scene sets on the couple dancing on the porch of María Victoria's home, then cuts to their embrace in María Victoria's bedroom adorned with curtains and candlelight. The scene noticeably accentuates their sexual pleasure, rendered in slowmotion and in color, contrasted with the bridging shots of the conflict in a black-and-white, smoky, and less discernable frame. Another notable difference is that the

65 Casamayor-Cisneros, *Utopía, distopía e ingravidez*, 16–17.

camera's angle provides a close-up of the couple's sex scene, whereas the battle is rendered with a depth of field. These techniques seek to emphasize sensuality over war or, more specifically, the political body of José Julián submerged in sensuality as an affectual biopolitics that deemphasizes but still upholds the racial negative biopolitics of the Afro-Cuban genocide. A voice-over of Mercedes's griot finally interrupts the sensual scene, announcing, "Guarda los secretos del fuego," perhaps intimating that secrets of passion—indeed, of "fire"—have a certain degree of political power.⁶⁶

These techniques mark Rolando's displacement of violence for sex, love, and peacemaking that is racial. Whereas state violence is important to denounce, what ultimately transcends and seduces is the personal narration of Mercedes's ancestors. In personalizing the event of the genocide through this sensual encounter and, moreover, their descriptive sexual act, racial violence becomes tangible—corporeal, even—because we experience it through the intimate plane. The technique constitutes what Trouillot terms "the continuous *enlargement* of the physical boundaries of historical production [that are] useful and necessary" to the contestation of hegemonic history.⁶⁷ Indeed, not only the camera techniques but also the film's emphasis on the sensuality of the couple enlarge a reappropriated affirmative biopolitics that resides in impassioned bodies and the private space. Contrasted with the "dark side" of biopolitics—forms of horrorism—affectual biopolitics emerge in *Raíces* through contested sources. As musical score, letters, photographs, black art, and newspaper clippings are all contained in a motion picture, Rolando inscribes a biopolitics that reproduces a private and personal history through acts of desire and affect.

Perhaps most striking is the way Rolando administers bodies in relation through the acts of the carnal to drive home a story of oppression. Responding to Weheliye's critique that oppressed acts of resistance against hegemony tend to be the only modules of "liberatory" agency, Rolando presents a case of affirmative biopolitics that does not negate or even *resist* the necropolitics inflicted over the black ideological body. Rather, the legacy of José Julián and his fellow party members lives on through the experience of the sensual, and within the reappropriated postplantation confinement-turned-private-dwelling. Moreover, this sensual memory is both ignited and projected through Mercedes's spiritual experience. Rolando presents bodies within a film that amplify the bodily, affectual, and spiritual *drive* for life against the backdrop of a black necropolitics, bodies that transcend the postplantation confinement of their era.

When Mercedes finally awakens, her lover Armando beseeches her to leave her scattered research and the hermetic confines of her room. González Mandri interprets Armando's "hay que sacar todo esto al aire, a darle vida" as a call for Mercedes to bring public attention to her findings in lieu of isolating them.⁶⁸ If, as Alexander notes, "the interior of lived experience" is the basis for an individuality grounded in African-based cosmological systems, Mercedes can

66 "Keep the secrets of fire"; Rolando, *Raíces*.

67 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 49 (emphasis mine).

68 "Let us get this all out into the open, give it life"; Rolando, *Raíces*. See Mandri, *Guarding Cultural Memory*, 97.

now amplify this Afro-Cuban individuality outward—indeed as film would project pictures.⁶⁹ As the docudrama draws to a close, the camera shows Mercedes, her two children, and Armando exiting the house to enjoy Havana Vieja’s central park, while panning over the racially diverse faces of a 1990s metropolis. Setting finally on the José Martí monument, it zooms in on this inscription: “La verdad, una vez despierta, no vuelve a dormirse.”⁷⁰ This quote notably references an imminent Spanish-American War and the hostile takeover by the US empire, but over the spatiality of the public plaza, Rolando’s use of Martian philosophy affectively locates an Afro-Cuban historical revival. Martí’s repurposed quote emphasizes how, even in the contemporary moment, racial prejudice will continue to threaten a Caribbean population if that population is not “awakened,” regardless of its isolation in a palenque-like refuge. This closing is quite apt, since Rolando’s documentaries often warn against a doleful repetition of history in which the African diaspora falls prey.⁷¹

Raíces projects the inevitable dichotomy between the spaces of local/national and private/public, locating within these fissures alternate histories that inform the legacies of colonialism and empire. Through the realm of the spiritual and oneiric, the pathos of violence and the sublime of sensuality intercede to account for national memory, despite the state’s willingness to repress it. Rolando not only intersects the space of the intimate and sensual into a dual biopolitics but also uses the space of Havana to edge out Cuba’s racial democracy myth that was just as relevant during the island’s early independence as during the special period or the present.

What Rolando attempts to do with the palimpsest she incorporates into *Raíces* is to question the racial rhetoric of the early republic, simultaneously with that of the contemporary state. In other words, Rolando daringly confronts the Latin American exceptionalism of racial discourse in both pre- and postrevolutionary Cuba that put forward the notion of a raceless Cuba. The film’s denunciation of Cuba’s inclusionary discrimination throughout its colonial and modern times not only challenges the notion that racial politics are improved in Latin America, compared to the United States, but also critiques the prevalence of a racial democracy in Cuba despite forms of racial inclusion. It is within this racio-political paradox that Rolando traces the “root” of an “inclusionary discrimination” in Cuba, from the plantational to contemporary Cuban racial inequality. As a result, *Raíces* celebrates Afro-Cuban customs in the space of the intimate to then grow this intimate space and harbor a message of racial contestation. Her filmic techniques amplify love and dilute state violence only on the surface. For what is really at work in *Raíces* is an unmasking of the apparatus of biopolitical control, offering instead a celebration of black sensuality and Afro-Cuban spirituality within the reappropriated postplantation space.

69 Alexander, *Pedagogies*, 290.

70 “The truth, once awakened, will not fall back asleep”; José Martí, “Cuba,” in *Granos de oro: Pensamientos seleccionados en las obras de José Martí*, ed. Rafael G. Argilagos (Havana: Sociedad Editorial Cuba Contemporánea, 2018), 34.

71 Rolando dedicated close to a decade to reconstructing the events of the 1912 racial genocide for her award-winning three-part documentary *1912, Voces para un silencio (1912, Breaking the Silence): Chapter 1* (46 min.; 2010), *Chapter 2* (58 min.; 2011), and *Chapter 3* (58 min.; 2012). See www.afrocubaweb.com/gloriarolando/gloriarolando.htm.