Afrocuban Dissonance: John Cage

and Rítmicas V *and* VI by Amadeo Roldán.***

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IMAGE 1: Percussion concert directed by John Cage at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1943). Photo appeared in *LIFE* magazine (March 15th, 1943).

Sonic Overload. In this photo, taken on February 17th, 1943, John Cage and the eleven musicians in his Percussion Ensemble prepare to perform a *new music* concert at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA).[1] The two pieces that Amadeo Roldán wrote for percussion in 1930, *Rítmicas V* and *VI*, closed that concert in a discharge of *clave*, donkey jaw (*quijada de burro*), *guiro*, maracas, bongo, *marímbula* and cowbell, bringing into relief both Cage's affinity

[1] Photo published in *Life* magazine by an anonymous photographer (March 15th, 1943, p. 42). For the MOMA concert see especially the volume of documentary materials and critical commentaries edited by R. Kostelanetz (1970) and the interview by Nelso Rivera (2011), where Cage comments on the memorable concert of 1943 and where he mentions Roldán, Caturla, and Ardévol. In the dossier of interviews that we included in this edition of the journal there is an abbreviated version of Rivera's interview of Cage. Recently, John R. Hall, in a brave doctoral thesis (2008), comments on the importance of these Roldán pieces and others by Caturla and Ardévol in the history of percussion ensembles in the United States.

for Afrocubanism as well as the limits of his approximation.[2] We might think that this concert marked the debut of Roldán's two iconoclastic pieces that night at MOMA, where Cage also debuted a rare Afrocubanist piece by José Ardévol, if Cage hadn't apparently, already performed *Rítmicas V* and *VI* with Lou Harrison at Mills College, in Oakland, California, in 1940 (J.R. Hall, p. 35).[3]

Image 2: Concert Program for John Cage and his Percussion Ensemble at MOMA (1943).

It might be that the evident recognition implied by the performance of *Rítmicas V* and *VI* at the end of the concert surprises some today because we're not used to remembering Cage in conversation with Afrocubanism. But surely Cage's concert program, while polemic, didn't have the same effect in 1943, as Amadeo Roldán was recognized in experimental music circuits as one of the creators of the genre of symphonic music for percussion. In fact, several of his works were a point a reference for the experiments and rhythmic *constructions* of Cage in the 40s, just as they had previously inspired the works of Henry Cowell, B. Russel, L. Harrison or Varèse

[2] The basic reference for musical Afrocubanism continues being Carpentier (1946, 2012). See also the magnificent book by Zoila Gómez (1977) on Amadeo Roldán and the general study by Robin Moore (1997).

[3] I have not found references for these concerts in the Fondo de Amadeo Roldán in the National Museum of Music archive. The published correspondence of Ardévol (2004) includes a letter where Cage requests a collaboration for the MOMA concerts and where he also mentions his prior hearings of Ardévol's *Preludio* and a *Suite*. I thank Nisleydis Flores for the reference to the correspondence between Cage and Ardévol. Neither have I found evidence of Cage hearing *Rítmicas V* and *VI* at MOMA in the Cuban bibliography on Roldán, which inspires or supports this work. In addition to the classic study by Zoila Gómez (1977) on the life and musical work of Amadeo Roldán and on the discussions that his national and international reception generated between 1926 and 1939, we have consulted the works of L. Neira Betancourt (1997, 2006), Radamés Giro, J. Ardévol (1966) and Angeliers León (1974), as well as the guide prepared by José Piñero (1980).

himself, who attended and commented on the Paris debut of Roldán's "Black Dance", and who maintained correspondence with Roldán following that concert in 1929.[4]

Cage's concert at MOMA was a point of connection or transcultural intersection that incites a rethinking of the relation between aesthetics and racial inscription in the divergent poetics of modernity. Without ever coming to annul their tensions or dodge their disencounters, these divergent poetics interact in their path through the unequal, bumpy roads of Cuban music's globalization, beginning in the decade of 1920.[5] One of the deep contradictions of Afrocubanism—as an instance of cultural and musical nationalism—resides in its inscriptions of "local" culture are ineluctably implicated in the routes and material networks of the "universalization" to which Carpentier, Amadeo Roldán, or Alejandro García Caturla submit their interpretations of locals musics. This occurs when such figures locate, in that complex network of mediations between centers and peripheries, what Angel Rama identified in another

[4] Significantly, Cage did not hear the classic piece by Edgar Varèse, *Ionization* (1933), at the MOMA concert. It is possible that this notable absence owes to Cage only proposing himself to "Pan-American" composers and, secondly, perhaps also because he tries to emphasize the anteriority of *Rítmicas V* and *VI* (1930), much less celebrated than the *Ionization* (1932) piece by Varèse. As such, Cage traces the genealogy of an alternative percussive canon with reference to Cuban history. On the relationship between Varèse, Roldán, Carpentier and the Latin American cultural world, see also the indispensable work of Graciela Paraskevaídis, where the correspondence between both are discussed and there is a debate about the frequent exclusion of Roldán from the history of the Euroamerican musical vanguard. There, Roldán appears too close to the work on national "folklore" which diminishes the projection of his experimentation within a Eurocentric framework.

[5] On the globalization of Cuban music, see the Parisian chronicles of Alejo Carpentier from those years, many about Roldán, included in Carpentier (2012) and in the work of Vivian Gelado on these chronicles (2008). Gelado explores the legitimizing role that Carpentier's journalism produced. In addition, reading the work of Jair Moreno (2004) on the incorporation of popular Afrocuban rhythms in New York jazz has been fundamental for me.

context as the processes of transculturating regional or vernacular forms within the modernizing projects of historical vanguards (Rama 1982, A.M. Ochoa 2006, F. Garramuño 2007).
It seems to me that even Rama doesn't insist sufficiently on the paradoxes of this system of mediations which affirm themselves in musical nationalism. In transculturating practices, reference to vernacular culture (to popular rhythms, for example), is not just a representation of a subaltern world that until its moment of cultural inscription remained outside the limits of national representation; reference to vernacular forms is also a *resource* that---though it's inscribed as the record of an original "source"—becomes inseparable from a struggle for the symbolic power over cultural "truth". This power struggle runs through the representations and intensifies and exasperates (itself) precisely during the traffic and circulation which supposes a new "universal" or global modality of the market, as well as what Benjamin called the crisis of the aura under the impact technical reproducibility.

The journey of Roldán's music to the United States, and particularly the concert at MOMA that we will analyze in this essay, situate us before a field of the paradoxes of musical nationalism and its reception in the United States by Cage and other composers and artists of the North American vanguard between 1930 and 1945.[6] Here we're interested in pinpointing something more: that the transit or displacement unchained a tense dialogue in which the postulations of aesthetic experimentation, beyond Cuba, bump into the racial inscription of Afrocubanism. Reconstructing here, as far as possible, the concert in which Cage hears Roldán in New York, we're interested in exploring the tensors of a relation between aesthetics and raciality which

[6] On the paradoxes of musical nationalism and its relation to vanguards see the books by Florencia Garramuño and by José Miguel Wisnik (1983). Garramuño (2007) condenses these paradoxes of musical nationalism under the oxymoron of "primitive modernities" in Argentina and Brazil. Wisnik works on the relation between Villa-Lobos and the *Estado Novo* of G. Vargas.

would be later negated or hidden both by the Eurocentric history of cultural modernity in the United States,[7] as well as by the testimonial inflections of regimes of identitarian representation. This includes the moments when these regimes of representation recognize some of their antecedents in vanguard movements like Afrocubanism, while hardly processing the tensions that, through representational-identitarian discourse, presumed the evident Afrocubanist commitment to experimentation and aesthetic mediation.[8] John Cage's concert at MOMA displays some of these paradoxes and contradictions and at the same time gives us an idea of the type of unequal exchange that constituted the *Pan-Americanism* of those years.[9]

Image: 3 A Pan-American Association of Composers concert where Roldán, Caturla and V**arèse are heard. NNMC Fondo Amadeo Roldán**.

However, it is not necessary to be unaware of the power relations traversing the maps of intercultural "appropriations" in relations between North and South in order to recognize in these

[7] See the important book by Fred Moten (2003) on the experimental legacy of Afro-American culture and its exclusion from the discussion and typical history of the Euroamerican vanguard. One example of the occlusion of the Afro-descendant contribution and the Caribbean participation in the history of musical modernity is found in Carol Oja (2000), who upon commenting on the importance of Cage's rhythmic elaborations and his precedents does not mention Roldán, Caturla, nor the Mexican Carlos Chávez, another figure very close to Henry Cowell and the Pan-American Association of Composers.

[8] In a recent work on experimentation and racial representation in the cinema of Guillén Landrián (Ramos 2013), I have critically discussed the implicit evolutionism in the distinction between a representational regime and an aesthetic regime proposed by J. Rancière (2001). The use of the poetry of Nicolás Guillén in several films by Guillén Ladrián ends up highlighting the experimental dimension of the social poetry of Guillén and makes us question any easy schema of opposition between aesthetics and identitarian representation.

[9] As Zoila Gómez signals, the Pan-Americanist networks tethered by Cowell and his colleagues at the Pan-American Association of Composers promoted Roldán and Caturla's work in vanguardist musical circles in the US, beginning in 1929 and 1930.

materials certain aspects that complicate the meaning of Cage in the history of contemporary music. Cage's approach to Afrocubanism makes explicit an elaboration of historically racialized sonic materials, which complicates the reductive identification of Cage as the emblematic figure of a "white-coded experimentalism", of a "white experimentation" as said by the composer and musicologist George Lewis (2009).

The Relevance of *Rítmicas V* and *VI*. What is the relevance of these pieces in terms of history and in terms of their musical structure?[10] From this basic question arises another more complex one that we can only suggest in this essay: what does the hearing of this work tell us about the fundamental role of music—as a form of creation at once sensible and intellectual— in the history of the tensors of a cultural field? How is music related to historical symptoms, traumas, or conflicts? Let us say, firstly, that these two brief pieces by Roldán, composed for a symphonic ensemble of eleven percussionists, push the limits of what was understood as "cultured" or "erudite" music in 1930. Its intensity didn't go unnoticed in Cuba, where Roldán's work had sparked, since the 1926 debut of Overture about Cuban Issues (*Obertura sobre temas Cubanos*), important debates over the authentic content of national music and its relation to experimentation. On the other hand, though they were written in 1930, it's very telling that *Rítmicas V* and *VI* had not debuted in Havana until the historic concert by Angeliers León at the José Martí National Library (*Biblioteca Nacional José Martí*) in 1960 (Z. Gómez 1977; L. Neira Betancourt 1997).

[10] The primary analysis of the percussion in *Rítmicas V* and *VI* and of the notation Roldán creates for popular instruments in scores is by Lino Neira Betancourt. See also the lucid introductory note that Ardévol wrote to go with the 1970 recording of these two pieces by the Cuban National Symphonic Orchestra (Orquesta Nacional Sinfónica de Cuba).

Image 3 B. Poster for the Cuban debut of *Rítmicas IV* and *V*, directed by Maestro Angeliers León at the National Library (Fondo Amadeo Roldán, courtesy of the Museo Nacional de la Música).

During those inaugural years, the Revolution fostered, in several of its emerging institutions, a discussion about the anticolonial cross between alternative modernity and racialness which Afrocubanism had already begun exploring in the '20s and '30s. The choreography of *Rítmicas V* and *VI* by the National Modern Dance Ensemble (*Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna*), directed by Ramiro Guerra Suárez in 1961— as well as the premiere of the Afrocuban-themed ballets by Roldán and Carpentier, *La rememberamba* and *El milagro de anaquillé*— show the emblematic character that *Rítmicas* and the work of Roldán (and of Caturla) would gradually gather in those revolutionary discussions, which brought together artistic experimentation with an anticolonial reinterpretation of history.[11]

For sure, it's very likely that during his life Roldán himself contributed to the silencing of *Rítmicas V* and *VI*: he refused various offers by N. Slonimsky, the famed director and member of the *Pan-American Association of Composers*, who wanted to premiere the pieces in New York in 1934. With no comment, Roldán instead ceded several of the earlier *Rítmicas* to Slonimsky (composed for piano, wind instruments and percussion). He indefinitely postponed sending

[11] In 1959, Ramiro Guerra Suárez wrote a paper about "Roldán and Cuban Dance" for the *Lunes de Revolución* seminar, in which he reevaluates the historic role of Roldán's experimental work and renews the discussion about Afrocubanism (see R. Guerra Suárez 2010). See also the interview we did with Ramiro Guerra Suárez about his choreographies based on *Rítmicas* and on the collaborative work of Roldán and Carpentier in this issue of *Revolución y Cultura*.

Rítmicas V and *VI*, the pieces dedicated exclusively to popular percussion.[12] Would this have to do only with the technical difficulties raised by two pieces written for vernacular instruments, like the jawbone (*quijada de burro)*, marímbula, or maracas, for which Roldán had to personally develop a rather practical system of musical notation, as L. Neira Bentacourt has insightfully shown? We will have to return to this question later, because, in fact, when Paul Price, accompanied by John Cage himself, records *Rítmicas V* and *VI* with the *Manhattan Percussion Ensemble* in 1961, his interpretation of Roldán's percussive overload unmasks a tendency towards *noise* which is distinctive of Cage's search and of his legacy[13]; it contrasts notably with the meticulous interpretation of the sharp timbre of the clave and of other typical instruments that can be heard with precision in the version recorded by the National Symphonic Orquestra of Havana under the direction of Manuel Duchesne Cuzán in 1970. On the other hand, it's not too much to remember that while Duchesne Cuzán's classic interpretation substitutes the marímbula for the contrabass (choosing an option that Roldán's score leaves open), Price and Cage, meanwhile, in their 1961 recording of the pieces, decide on the instrument of Afrocuban origin which is distinctive of typical son ensembles.

The work of Amadeo Roldán —celebrated Director of the Philharmonic Orchestra of Havana, who had been trained in France and Madrid as a young virtuoso violinist— does not all fit the

[12] See also Slonimsky's letters to Roldán dated in 1934 at the Fondo Amadeo Roldán at the Museo Nacional de Música in Havana.

[13] Several of Cage's works concerning the relation between noise and percussion are included on *Silence* (Cage 1961, 1973) and later on the anthology edited by R. Kostelanetz (1970). See also the note by Virgil Thompson, "Expressive Percussion" (in Kostelanetz 1970, 70-2). In "The Future of Music: Credo" Cage signals: "percussion music is the contemporary transition to move from a tradition influenced by the keyboard to future music inclusive of all types of sonorities" (Kostelanetz, p. 56).

stereotypical image of an iconoclastic vanguardist pose. It's clear that we're not trying to subordinate him to what Cage represents in 20th-century musical history, although we are interested in considering how the point of intersection between *Rítmicas V* and *VI* and Cage's experimentation helps elucidate little-known aspects of both composers. It seems to me that upon being interpreted by Cage, Roldán's work gains unusual reliefs (**highlights**). At the same time, it allows us to rethink Cage outside of the Euroamerican vanguard context to which he is habitually subscribed.

These two pieces from 1930 twist the horizon of intelligibility of national symphonic music through the workings of a percussive overload that, inspired in part by countermeter and by rhythms of varied Afrocuban origin, shake the conventional principles of harmony and proportion, annulling the melodic priority that the dominated Western and Cuban symphonic tradition. *Rítmicas V* and *VI* make potent the iconoclastic dimension of an experiment composed for a symphonic ensemble without melodic instruments. This immediately provokes a question, first, about the importance of rhythm, but also about the role played, if played at all in this ironic piece, of that which is erased: the *footprint* or ghost of the melody. We will soon see how the rhythm of the clave in both pieces elaborates an approach to the melodic footprint in discourse about national rhythm and its condensation in the clave, about which, curiously, both Fernando Ortiz and José Lezama Lima concur. For now let us say that we would be mistaken if we thought that it merely deals with a quick, schematic inversion of the classic hierarchy between rhythm and melody: not only the melody, but also the meter/countermeter structure of rhythm, as a musical parameter, has been unhinged in these two pieces by Roldán. As Alejo Carpentier points out, beyond rhythmic forms that are organic or codified under the model of some identifiable

tradition, Roldán elaborates *rhythmic modes* (Carpentier, 1946/2004, p. 200). Although they maintain reference to recognizable cells or beats (for example, the beat of the clave in son or rumba), these rhythmic modes don't follow a continuous or predetermined metric pattern. Abrupt changes in the frequency and the speed of the pulse in the *tempo* of *Rítmicas V* and *VI* add complexity to the classic category of "rhythm", at least if we think of rhythm as an organic musical *parameter* capable of regulating the continuous progression of the metric pulse identified with measures between culturally codified strong and weak accents. Roldán even works with the particular timbres of the different percussion instruments, establishing, above all, a contrast between the sharpness of wood (**of the cla**v**e)** and the vibration of the jawbone. Calling the saturation that we hear there "syncopation" leaves us unsatisfied: it reveals an ineffective reintegration of the sonic overload into the normative regime of Western meter when it defines rhythmic divergence as a (syncopated) exception, an irregularity or anomaly *in* a normative Western framework. The sonic saturation Roldán produces through the multiplicity of simultaneous soundings (**ringings**), lightly off-beat in the changing tempo of the eleven percussionists, also makes it difficult for us to speak here of a "polyrhythm". This is why Carpentier sees it necessary to turn to the concept of *rhythmic modes*, suggesting that there is a struggle over the vocabulary within the very heart of the "knowledges" at play. They challenge the sense of music, whether it be to sanction innovation or to de-authorize and exclude it from its normative field.[14] The history of Cuban musicology, beginning with the foundational works of

[14] Carpenter's elaboration of the concept of rhythmic modes introduces the problematic of the limitations of Western musicological knowledge before the problem of the sonorous *texture* of experimental or transcultural pieces. Pablo Feissel (2010) has identified this as the problematic of simultaneity and its corollary in *heterophony* that runs through the European musical regime, and the crisis of the notion of autonomous music itself before both noise and the gradual confrontation or recognizing of non-Western musics. Also key for me has been the analysis of

Fernando Ortiz and Alejo Carpentier, registers—in several of its most productive zones—the coming of a struggle to shake musicology of its Eurocentrism, creating strategies to transform the configuration of the archive itself. This would allow musical practices which are legacies of the conflicted history of slavery and colonialism to be taken into account, and make the porosity of the limits between cultured and popular music, which de-frames the habitual protocols and established borders of the distinctive musical disciplines and institutions of other societies, better understood (Ortiz 1969, Carpentier 1946, L. Brouwer 1982). In this sense, Roldán's revival after the 1960 concert—which likewise implied and re-posed the debated over experimentability in Afrocuban music—is no coincidence. It occurred in part owing to the stimulus of the musician and musicologist Angeliers León, noted figure of the legacy of the transculturation of musicological knowing in the nineteen sixties. Roldán was once again at the center of criticism about the Eurocentric history of musicological knowing.

The problem of vernacular "sources". At the same time, however, the raciality of Roldán's work problematizes any illusion of a simple reencounter of the popular percussive source or resource. There is no doubt that Roldán, upon subtitling the pieces "in the time of son" and "in the time of rumba" introduces a type of guide or instruction for listening to the works. This guide insists on identifying experimentation with *both* paradigmatic genres of national popular music in 1930. But there is no reason to accept the subtitles as the only or definitive frame of interpretation; we could take their indications, rather, as a *strategy* for authorizing new music. As such it would seem the composer responds to the marked resistance of some sectors of the public, after hearing the first *Rítmicas* by Pedro de San Juan shortly before he wrote the *V* and *VI*

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the epistemology of tonality and its colonial limits in Ana María Ochoa's work on the "howling" of the *bogas* and politics of listening in the 19th century (A.M. Ochoa, in press).

in Havana in that same year of 1930. In the words of an anonymous reviewer: "Amadeo Roldán's 'Three *Rítmicas*', owing to their futurist character, seemed incomprehensible to us […] Our perception forged in old molds does not adjust to these imaginative acrobatics which grate the nerves".[15] There are indications of how Roldán tries to pacify the perplexity that his work causes in some critics. For example, he places experimentation within the recognized horizon of two popular genres, although there is no doubt that the reference to these rhythms in a symphonic space raised hives among some. In effect, for a significant segment of the Cuban, US, and European public of those years, experimentation produces perplexity and surprise owing to the unintelligible aspect of these works. These are provoked by a tendency to break the socio-musical conventions whose canonical standard assured the effective recognition of the artistic work within an institutional framework. But it's clear that the modern aesthetic does not work from the reproduction of protocols or conventions of "artistic" recognition. On the contrary, this music elaborates modes for denaturalizing the conventional or recognizable dimension of its art, producing at times a tendency towards anti-musical experimentation (rather attenuated, for sure, in Roldán's case). So it is not a coincidence that the *negative* dimension (as T.W. Adorno would call it) of aesthetic experience, stimulates in a figure like Roldán, at the same time, an internal search for re-articulations, thematizations of a restored social sense like those same ones that arise in Afrocuban discourses about the "folklore" of popular forms.

Although I cannot treat the problematic arguments of TW. Adorno (2008) against the "regressive" tendencies of Stravinsky in the Right of Spring with the attention they deserve here, it should be noted, even in passing, that Adorno criticizes exactly Stravinsky's artificial return to

[15] Signed by F.G.A., Cuban Herald, 4-vIII-1930.

"heteronomous", archaic, or sacrificial forms (thematicized in the second movement of the ballet), where the "regression" manifests musically, according to Adorno, in the rhythmic disruption in the influential modernist work of Stravinsky. The relevance of this Stravinsky piece for Carpentier is very well known. Carpentier, however, signals a fundamental difference between Stravinsky and the uses of folklore among the Cuban Afrocubanists:

> The presence of rhythms, dances, traditional plastic arts, which had been put off for too long in virtue of absurd prejudices, would open a field of immediate action which would offer possibilities to fight for much more interesting things than an atonal score or a cubist painting. Those who were already familiar with the score of The Rite of Spring—great revolutionary flag of the time—began to warn, rightly, that in Regla, on the other side of the bay, there were rhythms as complex as those Stravinsky had created to evoke the primitive games of pagan Russia (Carpentier 2004, p.204).

Carpentier's argument about the *contemporaneous* presence of Afrocuban rhythms in Regla is parallel to his work on the fantastic real (*real maravilloso*) and his criticism of the rhetorical artifice of the surrealists in the prologue to the *El Reino de este mundo* (1949), a novel contemporary to *La música en Cuba*.

Without a doubt, the research on Afrocuban folklore and popular music implied a frontal criticism of the racism of other versions of Cubanness, which denied Afro-descendant women and men their participation in national history. For example, there's no doubt about the polemic stimulus Carpentier and Roldán took from the vision of national folklore that Sánchez de Fuentes (1928) promoted in his postulation of the indigenous and Hispanic origins of national culture. In the words of this foundational figure in ethnomusicological studies on Cuba: "we committed the *crime of foreignerism*, we transplanted whole into our productions, monotonous and routine melodic designs from whatever African sects known on our island (Sánchez de Fuentes, p. 80).

However, at the same time that we can confirm the criticism of racism articulated by the Afrocubanist discourse of Roldán, Carpentier, Guillén and others (frequently inspired by the critical studies of F. Ortiz), I would like to suggest that his alternative version of national culture is inseparable from the struggles for symbolic power and intellectual legitimacy of those who research it and write it. This even includes the discourses which seek to find a place for the subaltern subjects that constitute the "local" basis or resource of the modulating pacts of popular nationalism.

The usual interpretation of musical nationalism (and of musical vanguardism), as an elite elaboration of popular forms, often reduces and homogenizes the terms "cultured" and "popular", and runs the risk of naturalizing or becoming confused with the explanations elaborated by Afrocubanists themselves—even Roldán, for example—in order to *authorize* the social or political value of his complex and experimental musical practice and its social relevance. In this sense, it is not too much to emphasize the question of the performative and political effect of the intellectual *mediation* that musical nationalism inscribes when it redefines the relationship between the popular and the learned, between the local and the universal. Within the hierarchy of values that renew these dichotomies, the "local" ultimately becomes subjected to a process of stylization, of purification or translation that makes possible its intelligibility in "universal" terms. The universal state of music presupposes the prior stylization of the popular body, the transfer or conversion of the popular according to a selection by the elite, which also confirms a disciplining of popular practice or of its "aesthetic" sublimation. For example, in his extraordinary letter to Henry Cowell, included by Cowell in his *American Composers on American Music* (1933), a collected volume and type of manifesto of musical *Pan-Americanism*

which included works by Roldán and Caturla each, Roldán explains the urgency of incorporating local instruments, but at the same time insists on "de-purifying" and "denationalizing" them. That is to say, he insists on transforming their vernacular particularity to assure their universal sense or value.[16] In spite of its undoubtedly critical and alternative tone, this discourse suggests that the local and the universal are extremes on the same map detailed by the routes of transnational traffic and exchange. The mediation of *style*, that is, of aesthetic *evidence* as the elaboration of sensible material identified as the popular, would be a requirement for guaranteeing the process of translating or converting local value into universal value. From the first reviews of Jorge Mañach and Carpentier of the *Overture about Cuban Themes* until Carpentier's writing after the premature death of his friend and collaborator in 1939 (Carpentier 2012, 611-617), observers have insisted on the universal value that stylization generates through the elaboration of local or popular forms. This is how Carpentier explains the transubstantiation of folklore in Roldán's *Rítmicas*: "Roldán works now in depth, searching, more than for folklore, but for the spirit of that folklore" (Cartpentier 1946, p.210). Jorge Mañach (1926) had signaled in his review: it would be good to contrapose the appearance of these musical scholars of ours who affirm the Cubanism of Roldán's *Overture* with a "stylized" Cubanism. The distinction is very serious. Amadeo Roldán did not intend to aggravate our ears with a *chambelona* or with a sublimated *son*. His work is not just artistic, but of a superior art, and the formal elements of artistic expression cannot do less than possess a universal character: they are common to the art of all countries" (Mañach 1926). The discussion is surely with Carpentier himself, who, for his part, far from questioning the value of stylization, also confirms it as the condition of an art at once modern and Cuban. In his response to Mañach, published in the journal *Carteles* in 1927

[16] The Spanish version of the "Letter to Cowell" was included in Z. Gómez (1977), pp 167-9.

and titled “Amadeo Roldán and vernacular Music”, Carpentier insists on stylization as a transformation of the local while simultaneously proclaiming that “Europe is thirsty for rhythms” (Carpentier 2012, p.602).

The relationship between Roldán’s work and popular sources is complex and inseparable not only from the critical and polemic nature of his work, but also from the internal dynamics of power and authority that traverse the discourses of popular nationalism and Afrocubanism. Roldán’s *Rítmicas V* and *VI* are the product of a double movement: on the one hand, they disarticulate the rigid notion of musical structure, and they put into question the possibility of a better resolution to the dissonance of the sonic particles put into movement; but at the same time they elaborate a series of formal and discursive mechanisms to integrate the aesthetic experiment in the framework of a strong social sense. There is no doubt that Roldán begins to blur the limits of the musical, the guarantees of its intelligibility in his more radical works, when he exposes form to sonic overload and noise. But, at the same time, he does not cease to reestablish musical strategies of formal reintegration, modes of musically containing the tendency towards sonorous dispersion. It is prudent, then, to contrast it with Cage’s experimentations, particularly the Cage of sonic research into aleatory indetermination. Roldán returns again and again to recreate forms of reincorporation or rescue of the “notes” or sonorities on the edge of dispersion. This would be, for example, as we’ll soon see, the purpose of the *fugue in four claves* which *multiplies* the beat of three by two in a rhythmic sequence that Roldán locates at the center of *Rítmica V*. But before getting there, we should now resume the voyage of *Rítmicas V* and *VI* to New York and to the historic concert at MOMA in 1942 where Cage interprets them.

Cage's (Un)concert and sonic objects. How might we think about the transition of Roldán's *rhythmic overload* to the exploration of *noise* in Cage's work? What does the interpretation of *Rítmicas V* and *VI,* highlighted at the end of 1943 concert, say about the relationship between Cage and the historical dimensions of rhythm in modernity's Caribbean extremes?

Cage's program at MOMA responded more to a *performative* logic than to the protocols of a traditional concert. The percussive instruments and sonic objects that Cage put on state—wax sheets (**plates**), marímbula, car wheel rings, quijada (jawbone) empty food cans, China cups, bongos—show a work with a heterogeneity of materials which overwhelms the concept of the instrument and of musical autonomy.

Image 4. Instruments and sonic objects at the MOMA concert (1943) [Reproduced from *LIFE* magazine, March 15th, 1943, p. 62).

Let's pause briefly on this important dimension of Cage's innovation in the 1940s: the creation of sonic objects and their mixing with traditional instruments of Asian and Caribbean cultures. The contiguity of sonic objects at the MOMA concert of 1943 implies the problematic of contemporaneity or "coevality" (T. Fabian) of sonorities linked on the one hand to the industrial era—corresponding to the segmented time of the assembly line and of Fordist repetition—and on the other hand to the anthropologized content of traditional instruments, commonly related to the ritual purpose of music in other contexts. Wouldn't this be one of the meanings of *contemporary* music? That is, of its contemporaneity not only in the sense of its actuality but also as the

coevality of objects' multiple and asynchronous times which the cast-off ring of a Ford car tire and the donkey jawbone share?

The selection of instruments and sonorous objects is revelatory in itself. Its logic responds more to that of a collection of found objects (*objets trouvés*) than to the conventional necessities of the musical orchestra. As Duchamp and the first surrealists would have liked, the sonorous objects, taken from daily life, are resignified materials—liberated from the instrumental logic of industrial production or domestic consumption—and transformed into aesthetic devices. The selective operation of the objects responds to a parallel principle of incorporating percussion instruments from the Western periphery. Cage was very conscious of this multiple genealogy of his instruments and sonorous objects:

> The instruments son uses are in many cases the same as the percussion section for a symphonic orchestra, for typical Eastern (**oriental),** Cuban or hot jazz ensembles. Other objects had not been created for the purpose of musical use, like for example automobile parts, iron tubing or metal sheets which we use. In some cases the word "percussion" is an incorrect way of naming them, because the sound isn't always produced by hitting one object with another ("For More New Sounds" in ed. Kostelanetz 1970, **our translation, p. 62).**

Cage re-ensembles these objects and their multiple temporalities with the meticulous and audacious play of a *bricoluer*. As proven by the division of the movements or sequences of "Loves", the piece of Cage's own which he debuted at MOMA, the assemblage frequently responds less to a question about the origin of his objects than to a selection in agreement with the material of which they are made: wood, leather, and metal, which tends to reduce the effect of the musical codes to a material state of sonority. It is as if the central motivation of his performative intervention, in the vein of the surrealists, were to emancipate the repressed

sonority of these objects through the short circuit of their habitual, utilitarian circulation, and to resignify them through the medium of the techniques of montage or of sonorous collage. Evidentially, this is about a parallel process to the principle of artistic recycling which appears fragmentally theorized by Walter Benjamin in the notes to *The Book of Passages*, where the theme of collection and of the montage of fragments joins the question of memory and research into the past within modernity. (It is also clearly worth lifeguarding the distances between the Benjamin of those notes and the tendency towards the playful pose, somewhat high profile, which leads to Cage's performative vanguardism).

The 1943 concert put on display Cage's positions in the disputed field of the politics of musical listening. But it also displayed a certain position of his within broader discussions about the relationship between American culture and the world, especially the non-Western world which was gaining even more importance in those years of the crisis of the old European imperial order which culminates in the Second World War and the following anticolonial wars. It is no coincidence that the concert was celebrated at MOMA and not in one of the typical salons of the musical establishment. Of course, while the museum was not a "marginal" space in either aesthetic or social terms, at least since the successful individual exhibition of Diego Rivera in 1931, the curation of MOMA manifested the relative opening of an alternative cosmopolitanism which had risen to its peak in New York in the 1930s and which reaches a limit during the Second World War (the same era of the concert), when borders began to close and distances began to grow in a country heading towards the Cold War regime of McCarthyist suspicion and xenophobia. The performative logic of Cage was understood better on the stage of that

cosmopolitanism which artistically joins, at once, with the formal and interdisciplinary crossroads distinctive of vanguard culture.

But the polemic sense of the percussion in the concert was not overlooked at MOMA either. The reactions which Cage's concert provoked at MOMA can be compared in the mix of fascination and repudiation that shows up in the event's chronicling, as published in the press of the time. For example, the (anonymous) reviewer from *LIFE* magazine who covered the event entitled his article: *Percussion Concert: Band bands things to make music* (March 15th, 1943, p. 42). Calling Cage's percussion ensemble a "band" was a way of de-authorizing the musical and conceptual character of the concert, although saying that the band hit objects wasn't an entire miss: Cage's own piece, which opened the concert, called *Construction in Metal* – one of the first in the percussive line opened by E. Varèse, H. Cowell, and Roldán himself—converted into percussive instruments some car wheel rings placed among other instruments from Asian, Caribbean, or African traditions: gongs, cowbells, tam tam, claves, cymbals (**plates/ "platillos"**), etc., as well as the piano that Cage used for percussing over the strings. He thus activated, through percussive shock, the rhythmic potential of the exemplary instrument of European melodic hegemony of the 19th century.

It would not be necessary to backslide into an *essentialization* of rhythm, in its identification with nature or with a type repressed origin of Western music, to be able to read there, in Cage's gesture, the modern rediscovery of percussion which had proliferated in Europe beginning with Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Without denying the importance of rhythm as a musical parameter, we might rethink the interpretative and evaluative process by means of which rhythm transforms into a symbol or cultural *trope*. This is subjected to the type of idealization we find in the diffuse,

"certain manner" of the Afrocuban body, which rhythmically conjures the nuclear apocalypse cited in the seeing and hearing of Benítez Rojo in *The Island which Repeats Itself* [*La Isla que se repite]* (1998, 2010), an influential example of a diffuse *rhythmic metaphysics* which traverses contemporary Caribbeanist discourse (see Ramos 2010).

Noise and percussion. Significantly, in his concert review, the *Life* magazine journalist identifies Cage as a percussionist. This immediately slides the review towards an evolutionist story where percussion is a manifestation of a primitive or savage world:

> [Percussion music ---original English insert] (*Life*, p. 42).

The promotional character of this note does not diminish the relevance nor the projection of what it says. On the contrary, this review of the concert gives a fairly clear idea of the struggles of new music and research into non-Western rhythms and sonorities in the New York musical culture of the first half of the 20th century, where Caribbean references, especially Afrocuban ones, played a fundamental role. Although the journalist tries to de-authorize the concert, his review captures a connection between percussion and noise with which Cage himself would probably have agreed. It is at once clear that Cage's approach to rhythmic overload as a source of noise blurs the origins (often ritual) of percussion when he converts it into an anti-musical and anti-aesthetic mechanism. This presupposes a process of appropriation which gives rise to the well-known anticolonial discussion of authenticity. But we must not also hastily lose sight of the complexity of Cage's iconoclastic gesture. As if to add wood the fire of the debates over the protocols of the

musical institution, Cage had created and taken to MOMA a "band" composed mostly of women. Of course there were few women percussionists in the symphonic tradition. As we see in the details of the *Life* photos, a woman plays jawbone, another some empty cans, another percusses some China cups. The musicians of the "band" appear dressed in formal wear, the men in **frac (?),** which ib itself contrasts with the **heterocultural? (heteróclita)** and popular origins of the instruments.

Cage playfully *intervenes* **(in)** the protocols of cultured or erudite musical staging. This is exactly why this type of concert—probably a vanguardist antecedent to the *happenings* of the 1960s—inspired in its reviews and surely in many of his colleagues the doubt that Arnold Schönberg had expressed a few years prior about the early work of his student in Los Angeles, who Schönberg considered "a genius inventor" more than a composer (**See Hicks 1990** – highlighted in red in original). Schönberg reproached, among other things, Cage's introduction of new instruments or sonorous objects of unrecognizable origins. Cage responded that new instruments –which could be materials discarded by industrial society—were not simply seeking to broaden the tonal scale of music, but rather were trying to emancipate sonic material from the regime of tonality and of the structure of "musical notes". As such, his work implied a radical questioning of a mode of understanding music, which for Cage was inseparable from a modern sensorial programming inscribed in the history of power.

The distinction between music and the new art of sonorous exploration unfolds from Cage's ironic investigation into the conventional limits of the intelligibility of the object and of musical parameters. In Cage's own terms: "**[INSERT ORIGINAL QUOTE HERE]** (p. 55). It's clear

that below "noise" Cage confuses the references to multiple sonic sources, including the Asian, African and Caribbean musics whose instruments and occasionally whose rhythmic cells Cage works with. In fact, this lack of differentiation decontextualizes the sources and transforms them into objects of a marked exoticist impulse.

On the other hand, as Jacques Attali (1995) and José Miguel Wisnik (1989) remind us, we must not take the eruption of noise in 20th-century music superficially. For Attali, "if with noise are birthed disorder and its opposite, the world", then it becomes clear why the demarcation of noise is a key operation in the territorialization of power. That is why "a theory of power demands a localization of noise and its formation" (Attali, p. 16 ***Shannon's translation).** In contrast, Wisnik insists on the "the cosmic struggle between sound and noise" whose "interferent disorganization" acquires a key role in art, where it allows the transformation of "crystalized codes" and provokes the creation of new forms of language (Wisnik 1989, p. 32). Both aspects of noise were important for Cage. Here we add something else: the work with noise inscribes the trace of what historically had been a troublesome exterior, the wild outside of music, and locates it now in the space of sonorous elaboration, producing as such an ironic thematization of the process of selection and exclusion that had historically made possible the constitution of the "inside" and "outside" in the musical world, its principle of autonomy and its institutions.[17] This border was not marked just by the noise of industrial society, but also by the sonorities of non-Western musics. I believe this aspect of Cage's work and his gradual and problematic approach to the question of sonic heterogeneity and modern music explains in great part his interest in

[17] **Bolded:** P. Fessel (2010) relates the blurring of the boundaries of musical autonomy to the question of heterophony and the discovery of sonorous "texture".

Roldán and in the genre of music for percussion ensembles which Roldán had helped found with *Rítmicas V* and *VI*.

***Rítmicas V* and *VI* and the question of the raciality of rhythm**. In the MOMA archives there is no indication that Cage's concert had been recorded in 1943. However, in 1961, Cage collaborated with Paul Price to direct the Manhattan Percussion Ensemble during the recording of an LP of music for percussion, which takes on several of the pieces that Cage had directed in the historical MOMA concert of 1943.

Image 5—Cover of *Percussion Music* by the Manhattan Percussion Ensemble directed by Paul Price and John Cage (1961) which opened with Roldán's *Rítmicas V* and *VI*.

Among these pieces lies the recording of *Rítmicas V* and *VI*. Everything seems to indicate that this was the first recording of both pieces in the United States. The recording makes it possible to formulate the question about the interpretation of the vernacular instruments' sonority outside the Cuban context. It would be interesting to carefully trace the history of the incorporation of Cuban instruments in the work of experimental composers like Henry Cowell, Varèse, Russell and Lou Harrison, who all came before Cage or were his contemporaries. All of them were in direct contact with Roldán, whose most listened to works in the United States were probably *Tres Toques,* the suite of *La rememberaba,* various pieces from *Motivos de son* and the first four *Rítmicas*. Roldán's standout Afrocubanist pieces became in the United States a source of "folkloric" Caribbean musicality and a showcase for "non-Western" instrumentation. That is, here the *division of work* and the hierarchy between folkloric source and experimentation

becomes re-inscribed. The same occurred with the multiple interpretations of Caturla, but the most consistent point of connection in the 1930s was the work of Roldán.[18]

We would like to insist here on the technical problems given by the intercultural performance and the use of vernacular instruments. It is important to signal that their incorporation into symphonic spaces was contemporary (surely even a bit earlier) to the entrance of Afrocuban percussion in the world of jazz, as Jairo Moreno has analyzed in his work on Dizzie Gillespie and Chano Pozo (2004). Moreno confirms the hierarchy and the dispute between two notions of Afro-descendant rhythm and the subordination of the Caribbean immigrant under the interpretive and institutional regime of Afro-American jazz. However, by stressing the displacement that music suffers during its trip from South to north, Moreno's purpose was not to interrogate the tensors which also traverse the place of origin of the voyage. We must not presuppose a stable national origin that "later" will be subjected to this traveler's dislocation which exposes culture considered "ours" to distant translation and appropriation. The origin to which musical nationalism remits, as we have suggested here with the case of Afrocubanism, also implies fractures, scissions, and hierarchic mediations "among Cubans" and in their postulations of national truth.

But at the same time, when we hear the commotion generated by the performance of *Rítmicas V* and *VI* by the Manhattan Percussion Ensemble, directed by Price and by Cage in 1961, and when we contrast it with the percussive precision of the National Symphonic Orchestra's performance

[18] The participation of Amadeo Roldán as Antillean representative-elect of the Pan-American Association of Composers, directed by Cowell (co-founded by Cowell and Varèse), contributed to the promotion of the performance of Cuban and Latin American music in experimental circles in the United States and Europe, has Zoila Gómez (1977) has illustrated.

under the direction of Manuel Duchesne Cuzán in 1970, we cannot help but inquire into the effectivity of some performances and those of others. The contrast between the performance of the clave in Rítmica *V* is particularly revealing. This contrast puts on the table the question of the identification of vernacular traditions with a *knowing* which Cage and Price do not have nor seek to obtain. Would it be about a knowing of rhythm, of that play between *knowing and flavor* [*saber* and *sabor*] that Angel Quintero Rivera (2009) has identified with the escaped slave epistemologies of rhythm in the history of Caribbean mulato music? A knowing stuck to the body? This sets us before the thorny problem of the relationship between the particularly of rhythm, race, and musical nationalism.

Let's begin by saying that the paradox of cultural and musical nationalism gets caught in the ambivalent place that the particularity and the *physis* of rhythm occupy in their musical and discursive elaborations. The particularity of rhythm defines a national (or Caribbean or *Caribbeanist*) form, against the grain of the universal Western norm. But at the same time this bumps into the necessity of nationally "purifying" what, within rhythm, appears linked to a particularity of racial history which is untranslatable to the universality that modern culture seeks for itself. The history of the notion of mulato cultural forms, beginning with Afrocubanism, reveals different attempts to get beyond this internal tension or aporia which is never able to really resolve the relationship between national modern culture and raciality. At the same, particularity, already processed in a first instance by the symbolic or metaphoric function carried out by rhythm in national or Caribbean discourses—as a sonic incarnation of the multiple temporalities of modern Caribbean inequality and its constitutive colonial and slave legacy—imposes a necessity to *translate* the (racialized) particularity that defines national discourse both

toward the "inside" of its "own" territory (the mediating trip between Regla and the Philharmonic, for example), as well as toward the "outside" in its "universal" projection on the routes of exchange and transaction (not just symbolic, but also mercantile), of the musical world.

Let us return to the uproar over the performance of the *Rítmicas* by the *Manhattan Percussion Ensemble* directed by Price and Cage in 1961. Perhaps it can explain Roldán's decision not to allow N. Slonimsky to hear *Rítmicas V* and *VI* in 1934. "Dear Friend Roldán: Where is your Rítmica with just the donkey jawbone? You have promised me this Rítmica for the concert. Desconsolingly. N.S." (Fondo Amadeo Roldán, NNMC). Perhaps the answer lies implicit in the letter of the very important director of new music, Leopold Stokowki, who after rehearsing Roldán's *Tres Toques* in 1932, signals his frustration:

> We have performed your "Tres Toques" with the orchestra in several rehearsals and I've realized that the percussion parts present a tremendous problem. *We have good musicians but they play like white men*. Even though they play all the notes, the spirit of the rhythm is not in them. As they don't feel nor live the rhythm, for them it's not the real thing that it really is. I'm going to find some black musicians who really understand the music because I don't think we're capturing its true spirit.
>
> Do you currently have some shorter, simpler piece, one that expresses the intensity and fanaticism of black rituals?
>
> I'm really interested in your music, but it's very hard for me to play it with my orchestra, which with its European origin, cannot understand the spirit of your

music (Letter from L. Stokowski, November 16th, 2932, Fondo Amadeo Roldán, NNMC).

The racialization of rhythm could not be more evident. The white musicians lose the spirit of the rhythm, according to Stokowski, who sees no other possibility than to broaden the demographics of the orchestra and find more black musicians. This letter candidly makes explicit a series of questions which overflow, of course, whatever trace of racism that could be deduced from the letter. It refers to a type of *racialized division of musical labor* which reappears, although with the inverse sign, in the typical oppositions between melody and rhythm which prevail both in European histories which identify rhythm as a prevalent function of so-called primitive musics, and in alternative histories proposed by cultural nationalism. The latter invert the opposition between rhythm and melody, body and mind, to later idealize or essentialize rhythm as an essential attribute of the Africanness of Caribbean music.

To conclude, I would like to return to the role of the clave in *Rítmicas V* and *VI*, especially in *V*, in "son tempo", where we find, almost in the middle of the piece, a magnificent *fugue* of four claves whose contrapuntal structure hints at the role that Baroque forms would play in debates over modernity and multiple temporalities some years later (even in Carpentier in the 1940s). The pulse of the four contrapuntal claves which ding simultaneously introduces the question of polyrhythm in the piece. That is to say, of polyrhythm both as a form of *ordering* and regimentation of temporal and sonic multiplicity, as well as a strategy for containing dispersion.

Rítmica V begins with the capturing of minimal, brief units of two or three dispersed notes. These notes are reiterated in a series of repetitions according to the variation of diverse percussion instruments (wood, metal, leather), beginning with two pairs of claves almost superposed, followed by the same two notes sounded by drums (*tambores*), donkey jawbone and metals, which gradually gain movement and pass from the initial dispersion to more complex rhythmic intervals, regulated by a certain harmonic coherence which achieves its highest expression in the counterpoint of the four claves in the rhythmic sequence that Roldán locates in the center of the piece. The initial loose notes, which the various instruments sound in units of two and three, are fragments or remains of the Cuban clave beat. That is, they are fractured notes from a musical and cultural unity. From this moment of initial chopping or fracture the piece gradually proceeds, coming together and reuniting the dispersed notes, to recompose the fragments under a recognizable counterpointed structure. This structure distributes the accents according the meter of the classic pulse of son (two by three) in a harmonic simultaneity where, in addition to the meter, the sharp *timbre* of the wood contrasting with the vibration of the jawbone and the low leather of the drum set plays an important role. But at the same time, in the middle of the piece, the *cinquillo* multiplies by four, which no doubt prevents us from speculating over an organic, stable center in this piece, whose transformation *motivates* the relationship between the multiplicity of sonic particularities and a cultural structure. The movement from the initial fragmentation to the contrapuntal structure exceeds its musical purpose and proves an instance in which the articulation of the particles of sound gradually proceeds into cultural modelization. In other words, the piece contains a conceptual-sensorial dimension, where its own structuring of sonic material implies a labor that motivates the relationship between form and fragmentation. Because it is clear that fragmentation and unity are

not exclusively problems of sonorous articulation, but are at the same time two opposing aspects of a logic of cultural sense. We could say, paraphrasing Lezama Lima—who in *Paradiso* also converted rhythm into the figure of a superior order, that is, into a *metaphysics of rhythm* ("hesicastic rhythm, we may begin")[19] – that in Roldán's reordering piece, the fragments move towards the imam of aesthetic-musical function. Fernando Ortiz, who wrote the essay *La clave* (1929, 1995) nearing the years of the rhythmic innovations of Afrocubanism, might add that in the case of *Rítmica V*, the fragments do not return to just any aesthetic-musical imam, but to the imam of the four claves in counterpoint. We claim, then, that the structuring of sound in the piece is culturally (and ideologically) *motivated* because both the clave, as well as the counterpoint, are forms which recognize a dense cultural history. Music intervenes in these cultural debates. More than an "ontological" foundation of Cuban or Caribbean music, the clave operates as an ordering metaphor for a powerful cultural interpretation which projects into the particularity of rhythm the resolution of profound historical contradictions.

[19] I am aware of the debates over Lezama Lima and race (see A. Cruz Malavé **XXXX**). But precisely in the context of Lezana's creole (*criolla*) resistance to Afrocubanism, the following appearance of the musical clave, which introduces the theme of rhythm and the body in *Paradiso,* becomes relevant. We should remember the strategy of Baldovina, domestic worker in charge of Cemí, during one of the child's terrible asthma attacks: "She remembered that in her village she had been a drummer. With two female friends she beat two big drums. […] On the outside wood of the bed [Cemí's] she began to beat with her two index fingers and she noted that strong sonorities in a simple beat of three by two exhaled from the structure […] The child began to sleep" (p.13). Note how the wood "exhales" sound, which metaphorically condenses breathing and the beat of the clave. Later in the novel the reference to the clave reappears, but sublimated, in the Pythagorean triangle and the "clinking" (*tintineo*) of the rhythm on a cup in the final words of the novel. "Clinking" is the very same word Fernando Ortiz uses to refer to the sharp and metallic sound of the clave in his classic essay on that instrument.