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Santería and Resistance in Tomás Gutierrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío's *Strawberry and Chocolate* and in Fernando Pérez's *Life is to Whistle*

Abstract

The 1990s were a politically, socially, and economically turbulent decade for Cuba. It is neither surprising that it was during these years that the state amended its approach to religious freedom nor that it was during this time that Pope John Paul II made his historic visit to the island. Following the pontiff's visit, the state amended the constitution and declared itself secular rather than Marxist, thus removing much of the stigma that believers had previously faced. In this article I analyze the relationship between the national cinema and religious freedom by showing that many Cuban directors challenged official constructs of religious belief both prior to and following the pope's visit. I focus on two films—Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío's *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993) and Fernando Pérez's *Life is to Whistle* (1998)—and argue that religious practice as imagined here constitutes a resistant act as it provides a path through which historically marginalized people can recover their voice. Nevertheless, this form of resistance does not aim to effect major political changes; instead, it simply attempts to uplift those whom the Cuban Revolution has failed to incorporate into the nation. Indeed, the directors of these films use their (religious) protagonists—each of whom fails to live up to the demands of the Revolution—to imagine a system of belief that accepts marginalized subjects without requiring them to change.

Keywords

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Juan Carlos Tabío, Fernando Pérez, Fresa y chocolate, La vida es silbar, Special Period, Cuban Film

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Author Notes

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Introduction

On July 20, 2015, the United States and Cuba opened embassies in one another's countries for the first time in 54 years. Many events had led to these nations' remarkable shift in policy, but perhaps none were as interesting as the catalyzing role that Pope Francis played in the negotiations. Not only did he advocate a normalization of relations between the countries, but he invited delegations from both countries to the Vatican in personal letters to US president Barack Obama and Cuban president Raúl Castro.¹ The idea that a Pope could hold such sway with the Castros' Cuba is especially surprising given that the island's Revolutionary government had previously expelled clerics and spied on believers due to the supposed threats that they posed.² Much of the tension between the Castros and the Church had ebbed—at least symbolically—when Pope John Paul II visited the island in January 1998. Shortly after the visit, Fidel Castro amended the constitution to affirm that the state was no longer Marxist—which denoted a dogmatic atheism—but secular.³ Artists and intellectuals had long discussed religious freedom through various venues, including film; in many ways, these people laid the groundwork for the government's evolving approach to religion.⁴ Cuban directors engaged both elites and the public, showing that religious expression was not a threat to the island, but a normal aspect of many people's lives. Rather than oppose people's religious expression, they charged that the state

should encourage it. This article discusses two very different films: Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío's *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993)⁵ and Fernando Pérez's *Life is to Whistle* (1998).⁶ The former came out five years before Pope John Paul II's first visit, while the latter hit theaters a few months after. Thus these movies represent two distinct periods for religious liberty on the island despite the proximity of their release dates. Far from viewing religious belief as a political threat to Cuban socialism, these directors view it as an inclusive act that allows people who do not fit Revolutionary paradigms to live an authentic life.

None of the religious characters of these films conform to national ideals, and their resulting marginalization subverts statist dogmas. Rather than affirm a binary that pits "revolutionary" atheists against "anti-communist" peoples of faith, these movies assert a reality in which people's private lives do not determine their politics. Gutiérrez Alea and Tabío underscore this fact in *Strawberry and Chocolate* when the homosexual protagonist Diego tells his friend, David, who is an activist for the Communist League, that while he is homosexual, religious, and intellectual, he is also a Revolutionary. This confuses David, who never thought such identities were compatible. Given that this film came out five years before the pope's visit to the island, it is apparent that the nation's intellectuals and artists were questioning post-revolutionary postures toward religion long before Castro amended the constitution. By framing a person's faith as a personal expression, films like

Strawberry and Chocolate invalidated the persisting assumptions that justified the oppression of believers.

In both of the films that I discuss below, people's faith liberates them from the oppressive doctrines of the state, especially those of the "new man" that Ernesto "Che" Guevara proclaimed in 1965,⁷ which dictated the appropriate behavior for a "true" Cuban revolutionary. Interestingly, Guevara coined this term by appropriating the vocabulary of the apostle Paul, who, in his epistle to the Ephesians states, "put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness."⁸ For Paul, becoming a "new man" entails greater knowledge about human nature, which in turn carries theological connotations because all people are children of God. Something similar occurs within Guevara's thought; however, the revolutionary does not attribute success to God's will, but to the equality that will supposedly result from a "pure" socialism. Rather than invoke a more perfect religiosity, he speaks of a more just society. Similar to its Biblical predecessor, Guevara's "new man" invokes a religious undercurrent as it prescribes a means by which the Cuban people can live more complete lives. Guevara's doctrine of the new man was one of many prophetic discourses that formed the canon for what Damián J. Fernández calls a "political religion" that emerged following the Revolution.⁹ On the one hand, these discourses unified the people; on the other hand, this "political religion" established a dualist system that castigated those who deviated from state-approved iterations of identity and performativity.¹⁰

Both *Strawberry and Chocolate* and *Life is to Whistle* follow protagonists who fail to uphold the norms of this new statist religion due to the ways in which they articulate their race, gender, and/or sexuality. In each case, these characters turn to religion to find meaning. Their faith differs from organized (Western) religion, which generally demands that the faithful uphold traditional norms of morality; instead, the religion of these films consists of popular beliefs and rituals that are less demanding of their adherents. Of the four characters that I consider, three practice *santería*, a syncretic religion that was born through the fusion of the African religion Yoruba with Catholicism. Within this tradition, each Catholic Saint—and Christ himself—has a corresponding African deity or orisha.¹¹ Kristina Wirtz notes that *santería* emerged in Cuba as African slaves fused Yoruba with Catholicism. However, the scholar also notes that “an examination of ritual practices reveals closer affinities to Yoruba, with only a thin veneer of Catholic iconography that tends to accompany, rather than replace, Yoruba religious aesthetics.”¹² *Santería* as a practice resists definition, but it has clear ties to race and ethnicity. What began as one of many practices associated with witchcraft has now become “the most recognizable, and most emblematic Cuban popular religion.”¹³ As it is practiced—and depicted—in Cuba, *santería* becomes inextricably tied to Afro-Cuban identities as ways of knowing.

Strawberry and Chocolate

It is important to note that the practitioners of *santería* in *Strawberry and Chocolate* are not Afro-Cuban, but white. Nevertheless, both characters are marginalized due to their sexuality: Diego is homosexual and Nancy may be a prostitute. Carlos Uxó documents numerous cases where these characters practice *santería*, but his analysis goes no further than pointing these out to his readers.¹⁴ María de la Cinta Ramblado Minero extends Uxó's work by arguing that *santería* is in no way anti-revolutionary in the film, but that it represents an authentic expression of Cuban identity that lies beyond politics.¹⁵ My study extends and refines the previous observations by situating religious practice as a resistant act in that it allows marginal beings to articulate an autochthonous life in a world that generally rejects them. I differ from Ramblado Minero in that I view religious practice as political in so far as it challenges the absolutist doctrines of the state by providing a voice to those who have been unable or unwilling to assimilate to the rigid dogmas of the state. This is especially clear in the case of Diego, the homosexual protagonist of *Strawberry and Chocolate*, who is the most explicitly marginalized character of any of the films of this study. A brief plot description will facilitate the ensuing discussion.

Strawberry and Chocolate, Gutiérrez Alea's penultimate film, follows two protagonists: Diego, a homosexual, religious intellectual, and David, an activist in

the Communist League. Early in the film, Diego tries to seduce David after meeting him at a restaurant and luring him to his apartment. After an awkward first encounter, David returns to Diego's home and they become friends. He meets Diego's neighbor, Nancy, and, shortly thereafter a love triangle emerges where both compete for David's affections. Diego helps David, an aspiring writer, to become more artistic by moving beyond Revolutionary propaganda, and he even eventually helps him lose his virginity with Nancy. As the film ends, Diego's disagreements with the government force him into exile.

Diego's homosexuality is perhaps the most obvious marker of his stigmatization, but as numerous critics have noted, his marginality results from a complex matrix that also includes his bourgeois tastes, his intellectuality, his love of art, and, significantly, his religiosity.¹⁶ Statist discourses remind Diego of his shortcomings at every turn. One shot in the protagonist's apartment captures a lamp that resembles those that rural teachers used following the Revolution. However, Diego reveals that the government rejected his services upon learning of his sexuality. The film never discusses what happened next, but Senel Paz's short story "The Wolf, the Forest and the New Man"—upon which the film is based—tells that Diego was transferred to a sexual rehabilitation camp.¹⁷ Such camps were common in the years immediately following the Revolution, when state leaders claimed that homosexual men could not be Revolutionary heroes because they were not virile enough.¹⁸ Homosexuality was not decriminalized in Cuba until 1988, only six years

prior to the filming of *Strawberry and Chocolate*. Given that the film takes place in the 1970s, Diego is a criminal who can be imprisoned at a moment's notice. Gutiérrez Alea and Tabío emphasize that Diego's marginalization harms the nation as a whole. Beyond denying itself the competent services of a gifted teacher, intellectual, and artist, the state also unfairly impedes Diego from living his life authentically. The homosexual intellectual can see no societally-approved means for leading his life after going to the camp, so he concludes that the discourse of the "new man" does not apply to him. Given his affiliation with a wide range of marginalized subjects—ranging from homosexuals to intellectuals and people of faith—Diego becomes a problematic champion of Cuban subalternity.¹⁹

The film alludes to an Althusserian education system that interpellates Cuban citizens into their "proper" positions in society.²⁰ Nevertheless, Gutiérrez Alea and Tabío question the competency of national schools in teaching proper Cuban identity through David, whose affiliation with the Communist League has led him to study political science despite the fact he wishes to be an author. As an intellectual, Diego has numerous contacts in the Lezama Congress—which is dedicated to the country's famous homosexual author José Lezama Lima—and he possesses numerous censored, foreign novels.²¹ This deviation from the state ironically signals Diego as a qualified mentor for David, and it is through his friendship with Diego that the aspiring author learns to embrace his artistic tendencies and abandon propagandistic slogans.²² At first this is difficult because it

requires David to recognize his own feelings in a way that transcends politics. Diego helps David grow as an artist through a series of what Pascale Thibaudeau views as initiations into Cuban culture. One result of David's artistic growth is that he starts to question statist doctrines. Throughout the film, Diego plays the role of educator despite the fact that his methods differ from those of the socialist national project. Furthermore, during the film this protagonist challenges many of the certitudes of the Cuban state, asserting a place not only for homosexuals, but for intellectuals, and as we will see in the ensuing discussion, for believers.

As he questions official doctrines, Diego alludes to the problems that have existed between intellectuals and the state ever since Castro took power. In a congress with Cuban intellectuals shortly after the Revolution, for example, Castro admonished intellectuals to use good judgment in their critiques. The leader famously stated, "within the Revolution everything goes; against the Revolution, nothing."²³ These words became the focal point of a conflict between different sectors of the state because intellectuals and politicians often had different interpretations regarding what constituted a critique from within the Revolution and what did not.²⁴ *Strawberry and Chocolate* shows Diego critiquing certain aspects of the Revolution with the intent of improving it from the inside, but by committing this act he runs the risk of being signaled as a counter-Revolutionary. Indeed, Diego's tendency to challenge authority creates so many problems that he eventually has to flee the island. David reprimands him for leaving, but Diego

explains that Cuba has rejected him. The homosexual protagonist's persona is so alien to official ideologies that he is fully incapable of inscribing himself into the narrative of the "new man."

Given that the civic religion grants him no place in the national narrative, Diego constructs his identity through his personal beliefs. Thus it should come as no surprise that his religiosity catalyzes his expulsion from the country. David learns of the religious component of Diego's life when he finds numerous sculptures of Catholic figures while visiting his home. Diego explains that they are works of art that he plans to exhibit in Havana with Germán, the man who sculpted them. However, the government censors the project due to its polemical nature; indeed, Stephen Wilkinson notes that one of the saints resembles Karl Marx.²⁵ This juxtaposition of the intellectual father of communism with Christian discourses is a blasphemy not against Catholicism, but the Marxist-Leninist state. The censors allow Diego and Germán to show some of their work, but they will have to omit some sculptures. After Diego refuses, Germán announces that he will take his work to Mexico where the entire exhibit was accepted. In a fit of rage, Diego denounces the censors' decision in a formal letter. Emilio Bejel interprets this act as a "passionate conviction that art must not make any concessions to politics or yield to any type of censorship or coercion."²⁶ Bejel's otherwise convincing argument largely ignores the fact that Diego specifically opposes affronts to religious liberty. If the Cuban people could worship as they saw fit, then there would be no reason

to censor this art in the first place. The suppression of religious discourse in 1979 (the year in which the film takes place) is as deep an affront to Diego as is the censorship of art. Indeed, the protagonist's relationship with his faith constructs his identity at least as much as his sexuality and his intellectuality. As the state forbids Germán from presenting his work, it attempts to nullify the value inherent to these religious symbols. Art is ultimately a medium through which people can communicate different ideas—religion in the case of Germán. The state's decision to censor Germán's work underscores its desire to keep the masses from engaging with religious symbols. Diego argues that the fact that this artwork contains ideas that run contrary to the ideals of the state should not keep the people from seeing it. As the state censors the art, it implicitly rejects religious Cubans like Diego.

Due to the various levels of marginalization that Diego faces, it is unsurprising that he seeks acceptance through his faith. That said, it is especially interesting is that Diego is not the only character who turns to religion to construct an identity in a society that relegates him to the periphery. Religious faith plays a similar role in the life of Nancy, Diego's neighbor, and the character with the highest devotion to *santería*.²⁷ Nancy represents other problematic social categories in Revolutionary Cuba; she sells contraband on the black market, and the film suggests that she is—or was—a prostitute. Similar to homosexuality, prostitution was heavily stigmatized in the decades following the Revolution. The government purged the island of most of its brothels in the 1960s and thus greatly reduced the

number of sex workers in the country.²⁸ However, by the 1970s many women returned to prostitution because it paid better than other professions, particularly when a woman could service foreigners.²⁹ Nancy, then, is emblematic of the women of the 1970s who found prostitution to be a lucrative, if illicit, occupation. However, because she is a woman, state dogmas hold that she can be redeemed through a proper education while homosexuals like Diego cannot.³⁰ It is for this reason that state oppression continues to focus on Diego despite the fact that both he and Nancy fail to uphold Revolutionary sexual norms.³¹

Whether or not Nancy's supposed prostitution constitutes a crime, it certainly scars her reputation.³² Thus she represents "another type of marginal person whom the Cuban Revolution must recover in the process of political 'rectification.'"³³ Paul Schroeder emphasizes the sexual stigmatism of "impurity" that both Nancy and Diego face when he writes "homosexuality and prostitution had the common stigma of being unproductive and unproductive activities. This in a society that put a premium on quantitative measures of well-being, amounted to sinful, illegal, and counterrevolutionary behavior."³⁴ Both characters are rejected for their supposed sexual deviancy, yet Nancy never admits to being a prostitute. Nevertheless, she represents the nation's sex workers at a symbolic level due to the perception that others have of her. Her marginalization contributes to a suicidal depression. The second time we see her, she is bleeding to death from self-inflicted wounds, and paramedics are wheeling her to a hospital. She only recovers after

receiving a blood transfusion from David. This sharing of bodily fluid catalyzes a romantic relationship and leaves Diego and Nancy competing for David's affection.

Both suitors turn to the rituals of *santería* in their attempts to win David's heart. Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula note that *santería* provided a very different paradigm for sexuality; middle and upper class Cubans tended to adhere to colonial notions of sexuality that were predicated on Catholicism's "sexual repressiveness and Moorish emphasis on containing women."³⁵ *Santería*, however, "allowed men and women more equal status and recognized both male and female sexuality."³⁶ As such, the homosexual Diego and the (supposed) prostitute Nancy can ask the orishas for favors even though Catholic doctrines would classify both as sexual deviants and sinners. At times their faith seems to be another type of superstition—both Diego and Nancy also use their astrological signs in their attempts to seduce David. Viewed in this light, religion serves more as a resource for marginalized beings to find their place in this life than as a code of actions that promise to lead one to a glorious afterlife. Thus religion—particularly *santería*—serves as a counterbalance to Guevara's Revolutionary discourse of the "new man" by providing spaces for marginalized people to lead authentic, meaningful lives.

Diego and Nancy's relationship with the Divine is at times irreverent and ironic and at others sincere and devoted. They often request favors from their orishas, rewarding them with gifts when these are granted and chastizing them when prayers go unanswered. This aspect of their religious practice first appears

when Diego invites David into his home in hopes of seducing him. When David leaves in a fit of rage, Diego turns to his orisha and threatens to feed him nothing but bread and water if he does not bring the young man back. This humorous interaction elucidates the relationship that Diego has with the divine. He can demand favors, and if these are not granted, he can punish those he worships. When David returns to Diego's apartment—ostensibly to search for damning evidence against his homosexual acquaintance—Diego happily invites him to tea; when David reaches for a cup, Diego reproaches him, stating that they must first make an offering to the orishas. David does not realize it, but Diego is thanking these divine beings for his return. In a later scene Diego expels David from his home after a heated argument, and, upon closing the door, he begs the orisha to bring his friend back.

A similar relationship forms between Nancy and the orishas. Near the end of the film, she arrives at Diego's home where David is sleeping on the couch. Diego tells Nancy that David is still a virgin and suggests that she initiate him into the world of sexual activity. She indignantly responds that she is not a "whore"³⁷ and storms out. In a later scene we see her standing on a stool with a noose around her neck. When the camera pans over to the image of Santa Bárbara/Changó,³⁸ the woman admits that she would like to sleep with David. She then takes an *Ebbó* bath, which consists of certain liquids and herbs that will facilitate the seduction of her intended target.³⁹ This is not the first time that she turns to religious rituals to

seduce David; in another scene she prepares coffee for him. Uxó reads this as a *santería* love potion where she serves her target with water she has previously used to wash her genitals.⁴⁰ After the bath, Nancy meets David at Diego's home, lights numerous candles for Santa Bárbara, and prays not to mess things up. David takes Nancy up to Diego's room, where they will commit the act. However, the camera pans not to the stairway, but to the other side of the room, where Nancy lights a candle in gratitude for an orisha in Diego's home. David may believe that he is the active agent in this seduction, but Nancy attributes everything to her *Ebbó* bath and divine intervention. According to David William Foster, this scene not only refers to the relationship between Nancy and David; it also shows David and Diego having sex through Nancy.⁴¹ If we extend this analysis to Nancy's act of lighting the candle, we can assert that Diego not only sleeps with David, but that he thanks his orishas vicariously through Nancy as well.⁴²

Both Nancy and Diego attribute numerous events to divine intervention. The fact that the orishas act on their behalf signals religion as a path that they can follow even if they do not live up to Revolutionary ideals. Diego can request divine favors without being judged for his sexuality, while Nancy can use religion to seduce David. Clearly, these protagonists' religion is not concerned with traditional norms of heteronormative sexual "purity" and strict codes of conduct; instead, it is a highly personal means for forming a relationship with Divinity. In a world that has constantly rejected them, both Nancy and Diego find someone who loves and

accepts them for who they are in God and religion. Although their beliefs do not resolve all of the problems that they face—and some would argue that they make them worse—their faith gives them the strength to carry on. When Diego worries about his friendship with David, the first thing he does is ask the orishas to fix his problems. A similar dynamic emerges in the case of Nancy, who also turns to religion to move beyond her marginalization and find greater meaning in her life. Their comedic discussions with the orishas underscore their personal relationship with their deities. It is through these beliefs that they can find meaning despite their social stigmatization.

Life is to Whistle

The liberating potential of religion is not limited to *Strawberry and Chocolate*; indeed, the theme is even more resistant and identitarian in *Life is to Whistle*. This is in part because the changes to official discourses on religion at the end of the 1990s permitted Fernando Pérez to investigate the resistant potential of a person's faith whereas Gutiérrez Alea and Tabío could not. While religious beliefs and practices feel vaguely subversive in *Strawberry and Chocolate*, they are personal and healthy—although certainly not rational—in *Life is to Whistle*. Because it takes place in a time of greater religious freedom, the believers of this film do not merit sanctions from the state. That said, given that they fail to uphold the values of the

“new man,” these characters remain on the periphery, abandoned and forgotten by their own country. As they search for acceptance, these characters turn to different religions: *santería* in the case of Elpidio and traditional Catholicism in the case of Mariana. At times their circumstances challenge their faith, and their devotion often causes them pain. Nevertheless, it is through their beliefs that they articulate their lives and discover an autochthonous identity.

A brief plot summary will facilitate our discussion. The film follows three principal characters—Elpidio, Mariana, and Julia—whose only connection to one another is their relationship with Bebé, the omniscient narrator who equates herself with God. Elpidio and Mariana lived with Bebé in an orphanage during their childhood, and Julia is her biological mother. Bebé reveals that these three characters, whom are the people she most loves, are sad. Throughout the film Bebé functions as a God/orisha and executes a plan to bring them together and teach them how to be happy. She intervenes in their lives and provides them with romantic partners that invite them to Revolutionary Square on December 4 at exactly 4:44 PM. When the protagonists arrive, they see that their lovers have not come, but they see each other and start to whistle. Bebé reveals that whistling has always been her secret to happiness. In the pages that follow I discuss the cases of Elpidio and Mariana, both of whom turn to religion in their search for joy. Elpidio constantly prays to Santa Bárbara/Changó to negotiate his identity, while Mariana promises to repress her sexual desires if God will let her play the role of Gisselle in a ballet.

Despite very different religious paths, the religiosity of both characters facilitates Bebé's intervention in their lives. Thus it is faith, not a dogmatic interpretation of a single correct path, that holds liberatory potential.

As we have seen, Elpidio and Mariana spend their childhood in an orphanage. Beyond providing these children with a roof, this space serves as an Althusserian school where teachers inculcate the oppressive discourses of the "new man" in the children.⁴³ The school's alienating effect becomes clear as it interpellates these children as failures and denies them a place in the national discourse. According to Ana Serra, "Elpidio offers the first complaint in the Cuban cinema of that generation of men of whom the rubric of the 'new man' demanded more than they could potentially give."⁴⁴ Serra limits her observation to Elpidio, but her words shed light on Mariana's case as well; both characters live alienated from national discourses as a result of an education that has taught them they are inferior. Elpidio differs from the orphans at his school because he lives with his mother, Cuba Valdés, who is the only teacher that appears to love the students. One of the few scenes that shows both Elpidio and Mariana truly happy occurs when a baby arrives at the school's doorstep. Cuba lifts the child, and Elpidio suggests that they name her Bebé. Later, all of the children extend Bebé a warm welcome through dance and applause. One interesting aspect of this scene is the individuality of each child; they celebrate together, yet their movements differ. When the other teachers take over the classroom, however, this joy disappears.

In a scene set years later, Bebé—now a mute child—enters a dark classroom. Elpidio, who is hidden behind a curtain, whistles at her, and she responds in form. The teacher chastises her saying, “whistling is not allowed in my class.”⁴⁵ The primary focus of the film and the camera is how this interaction affects Bebé, but this scene also shows Elpidio’s rebelliousness beginning during his childhood. The fact that no one mentions Elpidio’s contribution to this whistling episode emphasizes that he has always been invisible. Of course, he is not the only character to resist conforming to his teachers; both Bebé and Mariana transgress official discourses through religion as well. This becomes clear when the teachers take Bebé to the basement to give her individual language lessons and a crucifix falls from her neck; Mariana recovers it and puts it on. Given that the majority of the film takes place at the end of the 1990s,⁴⁶ the scenes from Mariana’s childhood must take place in the 1980s, a decade when the state still viewed religion as a threat. These female characters’ religious practices deny them from fully incorporating the official doctrines of the state. What is more, the crucifix becomes a talisman that mystically connects Mariana to Bebé. It should come as no surprise that Bebé, Mariana, and Elpidio finish their education without becoming “new men [and women].” Mariana’s status as an orphan and her devotion to Catholicism signal her as different,⁴⁷ and Elpidio exiles himself to the coasts of Havana after his mother abandons him. If Elpidio represents the man who has failed before the rigidity of the imaginary of the “new man,” Mariana is the woman with the same

problem. Both turn to religion as they search for meaning in their lives; these characters' faith paradoxically causes them bitter pain and gives them hope for the future.

Despite their major differences, the beliefs of both Elpidio and Mariana allow Bebé to intervene in their lives and intercede on their behalf. According to Anna Hillman, "Mariana, Elpidio, and Julia are the dearest people to Bebé. Once grown up, and in a position to help them as a powerful deity and omnipresent narrator, she sets upon the task of changing their destiny and helping them find true happiness. This includes tampering with and developing their stories."⁴⁸ Hillman is correct in her analyses, but she does not mention the ways in which these characters—particularly Elpidio and Mariana—invite these interventions through their prayers. Elpidio's association with *santería*, his affinity for percussion,⁴⁹ and his dreadlocks associate him with Afro-Cuban identity and spirituality despite his fair skin.⁵⁰ His life-sized idol of Santa Bárbara—the Catholic saint who corresponds with Changó in the *santería* tradition—serves as his connection to Divinity, and many shots superimpose Bebé's face on the image, a fact that emphasizes that she is the true vessel that answers his prayers.⁵¹ Elpidio's religious practices remind the viewer of the ways in which discourses of the "new man" continued marginalizing black Cubans well into the 1990s.⁵²

Elpidio's existence on the periphery extends beyond his race. As a fisherman who constantly smokes marijuana, he comes across as lazy and even

useless according to Revolutionary discourses.⁵³ The clearest symbol of his abandonment is a tattoo on his back that says “There is nothing like a mother’s love.”⁵⁴ This refers to the two Cubas—his mother and his country—whom he continues to love despite their betrayal. Interestingly, Elpidio is the character who takes the greatest interest in his country’s future, and in many cases he begs Changó to bless Cuba. His patriotism comes into question when he meets Chrissy, a Canadian woman who visits the island in a hot-air balloon. When her wallet falls from the sky, Elpidio finds it, and before returning it to her, he steals two thousand dollars. He is fishing when he first meets her; Pérez cuts to an underwater shot where Bebé narrates the action. As she speaks she grabs a fish and sticks it to her friend’s line; after retrieving this fish from the water, Elpidio uses it to woo the Canadian tourist. This scene emphasizes that the relationship between Chrissy and Elpidio is not coincidental, but the will of a divine, omniscient narrator. When he is with his foreign lover, Elpidio questions his relationship to his country and his mother. In one scene, Chrissy takes him on her balloon to show him true freedom, but this liberty frightens Elpidio. She later invites him to move to Canada, and Elpidio finds himself torn between his lover and his country.

Given that this relationship results from Bebé’s intervention, it appears that Elpidio’s ties to the divine have played a key role in his journey to self-discovery. The construct of the “new man” has left him few options, but his faith has helped him identify some possibilities to lead an authentic life. His love for a foreign

woman produces an ambivalence between Elpidio and his country because he now wishes to emigrate despite loving his homeland. Pérez underscores the painful nature of his dilemma in a scene where Elpidio has a man burn off the tattoo on his back that exalts the love of a mother. Several close-ups of his grimacing face emphasize his pain. When Chrissy asks him why he did this in Cuba rather than in Canada, where such a procedure would leave no scar, Elpidio responds that he had to remove the tattoo in Cuba because such an act would be meaningless anywhere else. This sentiment underscores the contradictions that continue to plague him. Even if he wanted to, he could never truly leave the island behind because the grotesque scar on his back would testify to his Cuban roots. Ultimately, Elpidio has questioned his identity in large part due to divine intervention. Every time that he and Chrissy make love, his statue of Changó observes them—although several shots superimpose Bebé’s image over that of Changó. In one scene, Chrissy gives Elpidio several plants to decorate; later, when she learns of Elpidio’s operation, she kisses him, and Pérez pans to a surreal, high-angle shot that shows how these plants have spread across the room. The foliage remains throughout the rest of the film, thus alluding to the fact that Elpidio’s home belongs to the orisha of fertility. The discourse of the “new man” does not hold any sway in Elpidio’s home; instead, Changó’s divine presence undermines the dogmatic views of the state.

Beyond its approach to *santería*, the film also provides a nuanced treatment of traditional Catholicism. Pérez does not favor one religious tradition over the

other; instead, both become positive forces that allow the protagonists to better understand themselves. The first time we see the grown up Mariana, we learn that she, like most Cuban adults—according to the film—is unhappy. She sits on a curbside, and the camera assumes her point of view, panning to several men who walk together. This shot emphasizes her apparently unbridled sexuality as it depicts not what she sees, but her fantasy of these men walking naked. Pérez later cuts to a new scene that uses a low-angle close-up of her face to show her making love to a man in sync with a music box. These shots emphasize her passion, which both inspires and undermines her work as a ballerina.⁵⁵ Her sexual adventures almost cost her job when she wakes up late after a one night stand and arrives to a key rehearsal seconds before it begins. Here she learns that there will be auditions for the part of Gisselle, her dream role, in the upcoming ballet. Supposing that her “promiscuity” almost cost her role in her last show, Mariana decides to take a vow of chastity with God. She goes to a nearby church, bows before an image of the crucified Christ, and promises that she will never sleep with another man if she gets the role of Giselle. The contrast between Mariana before and after making this promise is powerful; her sexual repression leaves her melancholic.

Mariana’s beliefs require a degree of sexual self-renunciation that Elpidio’s do not due to the fact that she ascribes to a very different religious tradition.⁵⁶ Unlike Elpidio, and many Catholics for that matter, Mariana aims her prayer not at an intermediary saint or orisha, but directly at Christ. Her religious tradition is

apparently unpopular on the island; besides the sacristan, no other people enter this cathedral. She soon wins the role of Giselle, but shortly thereafter she falls in love with her dance partner, Ismael, and her blessing becomes a trial of faith. Their lust bleeds through all of their work, but Mariana remains loyal to her chastity covenant. At one point the ballet director says, “She is creating her Giselle from her own suffering. [. . .] I believe we are about to see something extraordinary.”⁵⁷ This observation suggests that, by causing her pain and anguish, Mariana’s religious beliefs have allowed her to reach her artistic potential. At one point Ismael finds her at the church and says that one can believe and love, but she rebuffs his advances. Several critics have asserted that Mariana’s chastity vow strips her of her agency.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, when we view her decision within the discursive framework of the film it becomes apparent that her sexual renunciation is a personal decision that ultimately edifies her.⁵⁹

The film pulls the resistant properties of religion into focus when the lovers—Chrissy in Elpidio’s case, Ismael in that of Mariana—tell their partners that they must meet at Revolutionary Square at 4:44 PM. Ismael states that they will never see each other again if Mariana she does not go. Curiously, the duo is set to perform their ballet at that exact time. Mariana leaves the theater moments before her show begins, and she runs through the rain toward the plaza where she hopes to see Ismael. Unlike Mariana, Elpidio asks Changó whether he should meet Chrissy or not. A car drives by and someone throws a necklace onto the curb.

Elpidio recognizes it as an *iddé*, or a religious talisman from Afro-Cuban religions.⁶⁰ Pérez pans to the Changó in Elpidio's room, and we see Bebé's image superimposed over that of the idol. Elpidio begins to whistle, and he leaves for Revolutionary Square. However, Pérez employs an Afro-Cuban score as Elpidio travels, and he euphorically shouts "Cuba!" when he sees a group of Afro-Cubans playing percussion and dancing in the rain. Clearly, the ambiguities and ambivalence in his thought persist. Upon arriving at the plaza, he sees Mariana and Julia, both of whom are just arriving. None of the lovers come, but Elpidio recognizes these women; he smiles and begins to whistle the tune from his childhood with Bebé.

His music appears to be a prayer of thanks offered to Bebé. Indeed, it becomes clear that the omniscient narrator of the film has carried out a plan to bring these protagonists together from the film's earliest moments. Such an interpretation makes it clear that Mariana's promise of chastity has played a key role in her ultimate liberation, not because Bebé believes in traditional norms of sexuality, but because it has provided the ballerina with a path to commune with deity. Perhaps she never consummates her fantasies with Ismael, but if she can learn from Bebé then she has the chance to find permanent happiness. At this moment Bebé reveals that the secret to her happiness is whistling, an act that the film has already associated with rebellion and nonconformity. This scene expresses the hope that these characters—and by extension the audience—can learn from Bebé's example

and be true to themselves regardless of the demands of the discourse of the “new man.” Elpidio and Mariana’s search for individual authenticity has revolved in large part around their religious practice. Elpidio and Mariana have different beliefs and employ at times contradictory rituals, but faith underlies both characters’ attempts to construct an authentic identity. This fact becomes especially clear as Bebé identifies herself as God, thus signaling her intervention in their lives as the answer to each character’s prayers. The political religion of the state and the ideology of the “new man” may have rejected them, but Bebé shows her loved ones that they can take hold of another discourse—that of whistling—by turning to religion. We may not know exactly what the future has in store for them, but Bebé suggests that there are ways for Elpidio, Mariana, and even Julia to find joy, even if the world rejects them.

Conclusion

My comparative reading has identified a shared preoccupation about religion’s role in society in both *Life is to Whistle* and *Strawberry and Chocolate*. Rather than assert Guevara’s “new man” as the appropriate paradigm for 1990s society, the directors of both films propose a more expansive view about who can be a Revolutionary Cuban. In depicting characters whose religious belief was not subversive, but a sincere component of their being, Tomás Guitiérrez Alea, Juan

Carlos Tabío, and Fernando Pérez all contributed to conversations that would ultimately help to normalize the place of religion in Revolutionary society—a process that culminated with Pope John Paul II’s visit. Just beneath the surface of these films lies the suggestion that a more open society will not only benefit marginalized Cubans; instead, the entire nation will be edified as people are able to be themselves without fear of reproach. Pope Francis’s recent intervention on Cuba’s behalf with the United States seems to validate such a position. Had the Castros continued to ignore calls for religious freedom, it is doubtful that they could have established the confidence necessary for the pope to help thaw tensions with the US. This paper has contributed to our understanding of the liberalization of Cuba’s approach to religion by explaining the national cinema’s role in fomenting the dialogue that produced greater religious freedom on the island.

¹ Gregory Korte and Oren Dorell, “Pope Francis Played Key Role in U.S.-Cuba Deal,” *USA Today*, December 18, 2014. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/12/17/pope-key-role-in-us-cuba-deal/20533525/>

² Augusto Montenegro González, “Historia e historiografía de la Iglesia en Cuba (1959-1976),” 277-283, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=35512039018>.
Damián J. Fernández, *Cuba and the Politics of Passion*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 80.

³ The Cuban state’s official policy is still to overcome religious belief through scientific education. Indeed, Castro established the Office of Religious Affairs—which to this day monitors religious activities on the island—at the same time that he amended the constitution. See Jeroen Temperman, *State-Religion Relationships and Human Rights Law Towards a Right to Neutral Governance*, (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff P, 2010), 143.

⁴ Known as “The Special Period,” the 1990s were a difficult decade for Cuba. The fall of the Berlin Wall led to the dissolution of many of the island’s traditional allies, which caused a major economic recession. For a discussion on how these conditions challenged the regime, see Ariana Hernández-Reguant, “Writing in the Special Period: An Introduction,” in *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*, edited by Ariana Hernández-Reguant (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

⁵ The Spanish title is *Fresa y chocolate*.

⁶ The Spanish title is *La vida es silbar*.

⁷ Ernesto “Che” Guevara, “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” 1965, accessed March 26, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/03/man-socialism.htm>.

⁸ Ephesians (4:24), *The Holy Bible: The New Testament*, King James Version, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Ephesians-Chapter-4/>.

⁹ Damián J. Fernández, *Cuba and the Politics of Passion*, 76.

¹⁰ Ibid. 76.

¹¹ “The Seven African Powers,” *Santería Church of the Orishas*, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://santeriachurch.org/?s=seven+african+powers>.

¹² Kristina Wirtz, *Ritual, Discourse, and Community in Cuban Santería: Speaking a Sacred World*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

¹³ Ibid. 25.

¹⁴ Carlos Uxó, “La santería en *Fresa y chocolate*,” 250-255.

¹⁵ María de la Cinta Ramblado Minero, “La isla revolucionaria: El dilema de la identidad cubana en *Fresa y chocolate* y *La nada cotidiana*,” 89.

¹⁶ Emilio Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2001), 165. Rebecca M. Stephanis, “La construcción del ‘Hombre nuevo’: El intelectual y el revolucionario en *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, *Fresa y chocolate* y *Guantanamera*,” 33-34. James Buckwalter-Arias, “Sobrevivir el ‘Periodo Especial’: La suerte del ‘hombre nuevo’ y un cuento de Senel Paz,” 711. Stephen Wilkinson, “Homosexuality and the Repression of Intellectuals in *Fresa y chocolate* and *Máscaras*,” 18.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the differences between the novel and the film, see Jean-Claude Seguí, “El lobo de fresa y el bosque de chocolate: Senel Paz y sus variaciones cinematográficas,” 328-331.

¹⁸ Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 172.

¹⁹ Several critics note that, while Diego represents marginalized groups, he is both racist and

snobist. See A'ness Francine, "A Lesson in Synthesis: Nation Building and Images of a New Cuba in *Fresa y chocolate*," 91. Emilio Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*, 158-159.

²⁰ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 132.

²¹ Diego's act of reading foreign novels signals him as subversive. See María Espinoza, "Tres personajes, tres símbolos de rebelión: el intelectual, la mujer y el homosexual en la obras de Humberto Solás, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Pastor Vega y Sara Gómez," 9, accessed Jun 16, 2014, <https://www.yumpu.com/es/document/view/14497207/maria-espinoza-hispanet-journal>.

²² Bejel, *Gay Cuba Nation*, 160.

²³ See Fidel Castro, *Fidel Castro's Speech to the Intellectuals on 30 June 1961*, accessed March 26, 2016, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610630.html>.

²⁴ Desiderio Navarro, "In Medias Res Publicas: On intellectuals and Social Criticism in the Cuban Public Sphere," 188-198.

²⁵ Stephen Wilkinson, "Homosexuality and the Repression of Intellectuals in *Fresa y chocolate* and *Máscaras*," 19.

²⁶ Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*, 167.

²⁷ Uxó, "La santería en *Fresa y chocolate*," 251.

²⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, 172.

²⁹ Ibid. 178.

³⁰ Ibid. 173.

³¹ Despite Nancy's illegal activity, state surveillance focuses on Diego. See Sara Rossel, "El 'caballerito proletario' y el homosexual (contra)revolucionario en *Máscaras* y *Fresa y chocolate*," 47.

³² Some women managed to leverage their experience as prostitutes to achieve high status. See Smith and Padula, *Sex in Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, 171.

³³ Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*, 162.

³⁴ Paul Schroeder, *Tomás Gutiérrez Alea: The Dialectics of a Filmmaker*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 113.

³⁵ *Sex in Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, 170.

³⁶ Ibid. 170.

³⁷ My translation of "Putá."

³⁸ Within the *santera* tradition, each saint has a corresponding orisha. Santa Bárbara's alter ego is the virile orisha Changó. "The Seven African Powers," *Santería Church of the Orishas*, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://santeriachurch.org/?s=seven+african+powers>.

³⁹ Uxó, "La santería en *Fresa y chocolate*," 253.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 252.

⁴¹ David William Foster, "Negociaciones queer en *Fresa y chocolate*: Ideología y homoerotismo," 995.

⁴² María de la Cinta Ramblado Minero, "La isla revolucionaria: El dilema de la identidad cubana en *Fresa y chocolate* y *La nada cotidiana*," 89, observes that Diego and Nancy have different orishas in their home. This suggests that Nancy thanks the orisha not for herself, but for Diego. Such a reading lends credence to the interpretation that Diego and David sleep together through Nancy.

⁴³ Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 132. The exact role of education in inculcating Revolutionary values in young Cubans has evolved over time. For a discussion on how this was carried out from 1970-1985, see Denise F. Blum *Cuban Youth and Revolutionary Values: Educating the New Socialist Citizen*. (Austin: U de Texas P, 2011), 72-92; for a study on education during the Special Period, see pages 93-123.

⁴⁴ My translation of "Elpidio ofrece la primera queja en el cine cubano de esa generación de hombres a quienes bajo la rúbrica del 'hombre nuevo' se les exigió más allá de sus posibilidades." Ana Serra, "La Habana cotidiana: Espacio urbano en el cine de Fernando Pérez," 95.

⁴⁵ My translation of "En mi clase no está permitido silbar." According to Paul Rubio, "Political Aesthetics in Contemporary Cuban Filmmaking: Fernando Pérez's *Madagascar* and *La vida es silbar*," the teacher's refusal to allow children to whistle symbolizes her opposition to free thought.

⁴⁶ Serra, "La Habana cotidiana: Espacio urbano en el cine de Fernando Pérez," 93.

⁴⁷ Religions like *santería*, which lacked major institutions, prospered following the Revolution because they could be practiced in the home. See Damián J. Fernández, *Cuba and the Politics of Passion*, 79-80. This does not mean that the state endorsed *santería*; instead, the religion's success was tied to its ability to remain off the grid.

⁴⁸ Anna Hillman, "Metamorphoses of Cuban National Identity and Transnational Flows in Fernando Pérez's Film *La vida es silbar* (1998)," 149.

⁴⁹ Several scholars assert that Elpidio's affinity for music simulates the act of whistling. See Mónica Barrientos Bueno, "Silbando mientras hacemos otra cosa: *La vida es silbar*," 89-90. Fernando Valerio-Holguín, "La vida es silbar: Histeria masculina y alegoría nacional," 60-62.

⁵⁰ Serra, "La Habana cotidiana: Espacio urbano en el cine de Fernando Pérez," 95.

⁵¹ There are two principal interpretations of the role of Changó in this film. Rubio, "Political Aesthetics in Contemporary Cuban Filmmaking: Fernando Pérez's *Madagascar* and *La vida es silbar*," argues that Elpidio's love for Changó represents his estranged relationship to his mother (and nation). Hillman, "Metamorphoses of Cuban National Identity and Transnational Flows in Fernando Pérez Film *La vida es silbar* (1998)," 149-150, however, ties the orisha to Bebé.

⁵² Serra, "La Habana cotidiana: Espacio urbano en el cine de Fernando Pérez," 95.

⁵³ Hillman, "Metamorphoses of Cuban National Identity and Transnational Flows in Fernando Pérez's Film *La vida es silbar* (1998)," 150.

⁵⁴ My translation: "No hay amor como el de madre"

⁵⁵ Hillman, "Metamorphoses of Cuban National Identity and Transnational Flows in Fernando Pérez's Film *La vida es silbar* (1998)," 150. Barrientos Bueno, "Silbando mientras hacemos otra cosa: *La vida es silbar*," 81.

⁵⁶ Barrientos Bueno, "Silbando mientras hacemos otra cosa: *La vida es silbar*," 88.

⁵⁷ My translation of "Está creando su Giselle a partir de sus propios sufrimientos. [. . .] Creo yo que estamos a punto de ver algo extraordinario."

⁵⁸ Serra, "La Habana cotidiana: Espacio urbano en el cine de Fernando Pérez," 93. Alfredo Fernández, "Silbar en Madagascar: El arte de mostrar oculto," 289.

⁵⁹ Barrientos Bueno, "Silbando mientras hacemos otra cosa: *La vida es silbar*," 81-82. Valerio-Holguín, "La vida es silbar: Histeria masculina y alegoría nacional," 58.

⁶⁰ Barrientos Bueno, "Silbando mientras hacemos otra cosa: *La vida es silbar*," 88.

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