Introduction

Sergio Ortuño

On a cold and windy June afternoon in 2024, I met with Sergio Ortuño in his walk-up apartment located a block from the old city of Montevideo, right off of the boardwalk (*rambla*) which follows the length and shape of the city, on the shore of the *Río de la Plata*. We had only exchanged a few messages over WhatsApp, and I knew little about him beyond that he was a musician, activist, and was recovering from a surgery. Like most Uruguayans I met, he preferred to send voice messages, which always contained 30 seconds of pleasantries before the content of the message itself. His voice stood out to me – deep and raspy, with a smoker's cough accenting the flow of words. He spoke casually, personally – jovial but not quite warm – from the very start. This kind of speech, his neighborly affect, was another common trait amongst the Uruguayans I met during my fieldwork.

I had just started recording our conversation, and we were already at the heart of the issues I had come to discuss. He was in the kitchen, preparing tea and smoking a hand-rolled joint.

> "They're all *showmen*" [in Spanish, *son todos personalidades,* 'personalities'] "I stopped caring about whether or not the music was good a long time ago… When you have musicians like them playing at the inauguration of a commercial paper mill owned by a national industry, you know it's bullshit".

We were talking about *Candombe*, an Afro-Uruguayan percussion genre and set of rhythms which form an integral part of Afro-Uruguayan history and culture. Ortuño, himself an Afro-Uruguayan from Montevideo, was a key part of a movement which culminated in the recognition of Candombe as *Intangible Cultural Heritage* by UNESCO in 2009. Ortuño was also instrumental in the creation of a national *Day of Candombe* soon after. He worked extensively alongside his cousin, Edgardo Ortuño, the first Afro-Uruguayan parliamentarian, to achieve this. As a musician, he has been featured in the

percussion sections of many important Uruguayan groups as well as has published his own solo music. One project worth highlighting is his "Black Musik of the City of Montevideo" (*Musika Negra de la Ciudad de Montevideo)*, a set of albums which he released under the name "Victims of the Truth" (*Victimas de la Verdad)*. Beyond this work, he has led workshops and participated in documentaries with the goal of shifting attitudes towards Candombe within national discourse, by expanding a notion of Afro-Uruguayan identity beyond the mere practice of this music. His musicianship and activism are two halves of a whole, the exercise of his social and cultural identity towards change in public conceptions of Candombe. In order to achieve this, he foregrounds a multi-faceted approach of legal recognition of Afro-Uruguayan histories and the production of music, prose, and cultural critique which challenges official and popular histories and cultural conceptions.

Despite his personal and professional commitments to the practice, Sergio is (more than) skeptical of most other Candombe musicians. He feels that they've sold themselves out to the national establishment. Mocking the situation, he voiced the mainstream claims:

> "The only representation [Afro-Uruguayans have] in dominant society, is Candombe of *los Afros*. But it's not just theirs anymore. It belongs to all of us".

He was adamant that most uses of Candombe only served to further the entrenchment of the idea of Candombe as a national phenomenon.

> "It's something that's useful for a lot of us [Afro-Uruguayans]. It's a kind of cultural recognition for us… But because it's a tool, everyone is using it towards different ends and they're not working together. We're not working together".

Later, he added,

> "there was a writer, also a musician, named Lamarque Pons. He said 'Candombe has a *dark side* in Uruguay' [in Spanish, *tiene mal olor*, it has a 'bad smell']. Well, this has to do with racism. It has to do with the place that Black people [in Spanish, *los negros*] occupy in society. More than the fact that you see racism less today, it's that it operates in a different way. For example, we're intangible cultural heritage but there isn't a single governmental group that works on Candombe.

> They celebrate the culture, but they don't really know what it is. It's lazy".

In one of the many video clips of interviews and documentaries he sent me via WhatsApp, he says something similar. "Candombe is Afro-Uruguayan culture, dressed up as a popular movement".

Sergio's overlapping passion for and skepticism over Candombe are part and parcel of his work and of his worldview. He is a *Candombero* at heart – his music is meant to tell stories and remake histories and to highlight the richness of his cultural heritage, of Afro-Uruguay. Yet he fears that Candombe is too easily limited to an aesthetic context which reproduces a set of discourses in which Candombe represents concepts of internal diversity and national cultural unity, in which, as he says, "Candombe no longer belongs to us". His life's work is against this claim, to find a stake in a Candombe which must remain egalitarian and democratic, but which strives to regain a distinctly Afro-Uruguayan political voice. In this battle, he feels alone.

At the Heart of the Beat

This thesis takes Sergio Ortuño's ambivalent yet dedicated relationship with Candombe as a starting point for a conversation about the relationship between hegemony and agency. In more specific terms, it enters a debate about the processes by which systems of culture and politics produce and reinforce meaning via behavior (performance). In the context of Candombe, this means asking questions about what musical or practical elements of Candombe become salient in its different conceptions and practices, and across time. My approach hinges on the emerging frameworks of critical semiotics within anthropology (particularly, linguistic anthropology) and ethnomusicology. I investigate how exactly conceptions of Candombe circulate in relation to the practice of Candombe itself. The particularity of those relationships will give clues to the processes by which Candombe operates in and on Uruguayan society as a whole. Beyond this, the goal is to address that initial disparity between Ortuño's activism and his music. What are the values and intentions behind this activism

whose explicit goal is to resignify the political meanings of Candombe, through Candombe itself?

This thesis is also an ethnography of my month of fieldwork in Montevideo. In my time in Montevideo, I attended Candombe events on the street, visited museums of Uruguayan art and culture, and interviewed musicians, activists, and scholars. The purpose of my fieldwork was to gather archival and ethnographic data, but also to get a taste for the first-hand, embodied experience of Candombe. My theoretical approach to Candombe hinges on an analysis of Uruguayan 'cultural politics', which are ways in which systems of power become intertwined with one's sense of self and tools for self-expression (Prado 2016). Yet, these cultural politics are often overshadowed in daily life by personal, aesthetic experiences of culture. Candombe, as I was able to observe it on-the-ground, brings Uruguayans from all walks of life together pridefully, dancing in bars and in the streets. The political value of community joy is immense. Because of the respect and attention afforded many Afro-Uruguayans via Candombe, the Afro-Uruguayan intellectuals I interviewed highlighted Candombe as something valuable their community brings to the table in Uruguayan society. In this way, the aesthetic experiences which are shared by Uruguayans across racial and political boundaries form a crucial part of the process by which meanings of culture are produced. By interweaving analyses of the cultural politics of Candombe with discussions of elements of its varied forms of performance, I can trace how these two seemingly separate registers of culture have interacted and influenced one another throughout Candombe's history.

My analytic strategy is based in detailing performances of Candombe across different contexts. In a chapter on performance theory in the book entitled *Theory for Ethnomusicology*, Ruth Stone (2008) breaks down the ways in which ethnomusicologists such as herself have approached performance as an important field of analysis. Drawing on another important ethnomusicologist and linguistic anthropologist, Richard Bauman, she highlights that "the goal of [ethnomusicological] research is to study performance as a series of strategic devices that serve to structure the performance" (Stone 2008, 137). She further compounds this notion of performance by including a notion of 'performativity',

which Judith Butler (1990) coined to conceptualize how individuals perform abstract categories, namely gender, via everyday behaviors. These two views of performance can be reconciled by viewing performance as a reflexive mediator between individuals and larger societal structures.

Culture is an important axis of social cohesion, senses of belonging, and operates to distribute and gatekeep access to forms of political agency in communities of all sizes, from the nation-state to the ethnic community. Latin American studies scholars have long viewed political interactions with culture as central to the articulation of the nation-state and the construction of spheres of national identity in Latin America (Wade 1997, Yúdice 2003, Picún 2010, Luker 2016). Undoubtedly, Afro-Uruguayan culture through Candombe has been critical to the construction of Uruguayan national identity for well over a century. Within this conception, Uruguay is imagined as a modern, racially integrated nation. Afro-Uruguayan culture is viewed as the source of Uruguayan vernacular culture, and as evidence of Uruguay's membership in a Latin America defined on the global scale by its diverse populations and forms of expression. Nonetheless, Uruguay's status as the 'whitest nation in Latin America' is maintained by the mythologizing of Candombe's connection to an African past, juxtaposed with its contemporary urban and proletariat character.

Beyond this, the elevation of Candombe to the national level also demonstrates a shift from overt discussions of race to the discussion of race in cultural terms. In the 1980s and 90s, scholars across the fields of cultural critique and sociology would term this "cultural racism" (Barker 1981 in Hall 2000, 224). In Latin America, this cultural fundamentalism can be seen in the ways in which cultural practices or other traits are frequently ascribed to specific groups as essential, almost biological, traits. This compounds with strong discourses of racial mixture, or *mestizaje*, whereby each of these groups are taken to be the ingredients through which larger society comes about. In this 'multi-culturalist' conception (Hall 2000), all of these cultural practices are 'owned' and practiced by the whole of society, but are seen as emanating from specific groups as the products of specific histories.

In Uruguay, this has led to the domination of the cultural form by non-Afrodescendant sectors of the population (Andrews 2010). In essence, the

appropriation of Candombe has meant that Candombe has become an important field in which historical narratives and contemporary identities vie for predominance, while also remaining a musical practice centered around community, celebration, and dance. The performance of Candombe is central to my analyses because it structures the genre's pragmatic and musical qualities, while also reworking and displacing these qualities in order to articulate larger cultural identities and narratives. Taking on performances means taking on individuals as complex webs of entanglements which draw upon cultural and musical structures but who are not always defined by them. One way in which this is relevant to my study concerns the strategic engagement with Candombe by Afro-Uruguayan musicians and activists. As Sergio Ortuño and other activists highlight, Candombe is only one piece of the Afro-Uruguayan identity, but it is often taken to represent the whole of Afro culture. Many Afro-Uruguayans, in response, mobilize their privileged position within Candombe as sources of the tradition to create opportunities for themselves and make explicit political and social critiques. Thus, they also engage in a form of *strategic essentialism* (Spivak, in Grozs 1984), utilizing Candombe's strength as part of the national cultural identity towards a variety of causes, including financial gain, social recognition and organization, and agentive, 'reparative' creativity.

Candombe: Afro-Uruguayan History, Uruguayan Culture

As a genre of collective percussion performance, Candombe is a cultural practice which was born out of the community of enslaved Africans in the 18th and 19th centuries in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. It is a distant cousin of Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian musical and syncretic religious practice based on orixa (spirit) worship, similar to Afro-Cuban Santería and later Conga groups. In Uruguay, the most visible religious aspects of the practice have disappeared. The similarities to Candomblé rest in the music and in the instruments, three distinct types of drums called *tambores* in Uruguay. Today, Candombe is recognized as the "Uruguayan national rhythm" for its distinctive *clave*, or rhythmic 'key'.

Foundational scholars of Candombe such as the Uruguayan ethnomusicologist Lauro Ayestaran (1953, 1967) argue that Candombe was born as the primary method of preserving and transmitting Afro-Uruguayan histories and culture from across the Atlantic Ocean[1]. The Afro-Uruguayan community currently makes up between 10 to 13 percent of the national population, but was historically much more significant, with over a third of the population being marked as African (Black) in the 1805 census (Andrews 2010, 24). What distinguished Montevideo and Uruguay from the rest of slaveholding Latin America was the relatively late founding of Montevideo and the high percentage of enslavement at the time of emancipation. Following this, a majority of these enslaved Uruguayans spent more time in Montevideo and in domestic contexts than in rural agriculture. This produced strong pressures for both assimilation and acculturation, but also enabled the concretization of Black cultural forms in the Uruguayan imaginary earlier than in many other urban spheres of Latin America. Outside of Montevideo, Uruguay also has a long history of runaway slave communities, called *quilombos*, most frequently founded by escaped slaves from southern Brazil.

As a mural I photographed (Figure 1.1) on a neo-colonial building in *Barrio Palermo*, a historically important neighborhood for Afro-Uruguayans, reads, "The tambor holds memory, the soul of the drummer, and the soul of his ancestors". In the early years of Candombe, it was practiced by Afro-Uruguayans across a wide range of contexts – in homes, at social gatherings, and on holidays or for special rituals. Diverse ethnic coalitions of Afro-Uruguayans maintained their own rhythms and dances.

In this conception, Candombe was not a specific music or rhythm, but a mode of musical expression via the drums and the community-oriented contexts in which they were played. At the time, it would not have been called Candombe – rather referred to by a series of interchangeable terms such as *calenda, bambula,* or even *tango*. In an interview I conducted with an important Afro-descendent

[1] This claim is corroborated by its continued relevance for forms of practices of cultural sovereignty within the Afro-Uruguayan community, and by the alternate histories of Candombe Afro-Uruguayan activists often tell (Interview with Tomás, Summer 2024).

Candombe musician and organizer, Diego Paredes, he explained his own conception of Candombe.

> "Candombe is the cultural, spiritual, and practical tool that we have.. that a lot of people have… It saves you, and it joins you to the rest of society… It taught me, it teaches me a lot: to be tolerant, to share, to respect, to be respected, to circulate [my ideas]. It summons a very pure part of me. The part that I share with my ancestors, with those who are still here and with those who aren't. It goes beyond playing on a stage or on the street. It's the biggest tool I have… For me, Candombe is everything".

Images of Africanía
The poster reads From Africa to Uruguay – presented by BANTU, the African Ballet of Montevideo (Photos by author, Summer 2024)

Similarly, in the only English academic book written about Afro-Uruguay, George Reid Andrews interviews many key Afro-Uruguayan musicians and activists. There, Fernando 'Lobo' Nuñez, one of the most famous drum-makers and percussionists of the 20th century, says it plainly, "Candombe is an essence of the race" (Andrew 2010, 127). These strategic essentializations are a key part of narratives of Candombe which have survived until the present day. They are representations of identity in its most simple form – represented as part of the body itself.

From the mid 19th century onwards, Candombe practice began to be molded by musicians' strongly reflexive relationship with dominant cultural

narratives, or discourses, about the genre. These discourses are key to the conceptions of Candombe held today. The *llamada*, or 'call', is the nucleus of this conception. A commonly shared folk history of the llamada envisions it as a spontaneous event from urban Montevideo during the 19th century. In this account, Afro-Uruguayan men would sit outside their homes and play phrases on their tambores. The acoustics of the neighborhoods would allow the music to reach blocks away, and other drummers would join in, responding to these phrases. Thus, a 'song' might be constructed across an entire neighborhood, via the voices and drums of many drummers.

From the colloquial llamada emerges the idea of the *comparsa*. The comparsa is a transnational phenomenon, with equivalents in the Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban practices mentioned above. They developed similarly within different Black communities across Latin America – via the creation of community oriented musical and religious groups. The name, however, refers to the Spanish traditional carnival troupe. In the Uruguayan context, a comparsa is a larger group of drummers, with a more structured musical form and more structured roles which vary based on the drum being played and which switch off over the course of a performance. These groups would perform in religious rituals, accompanied by traditional forms of dance including theatrical performance as religious personalities (Carvalho-Neto 1962). George Reid Andrews, in an article on the history of Candombe, charts a history which shows how prevalent these sorts of groups, and the communal practices they embodied, were, even as early as 1840. He writes –

> "During the first half of the 1800s, the city [Montevideo] had 15 – 20 such associations serving the needs of the Congo, Benguela, Mina, Calabarí, and other African peoples. They functioned as religious centers, mutual aid societies, and lobbying organizations to negotiate with public officials and elites on behalf of their members… Candombes were held not just on the Day of the Kings but also on other major religious holidays, and many Sundays, throughout the year. For the inhabitants of the city, both white and black, they were an unfailing source of fascination and excitement. In a city that as late as 1860 did not exceed 60,000 people, crowds of 5,000 – 6,000 would converge on the dances, a multitude drawn "not just from the poor class but from the most select of

> Montevideo society," reported the newspaper El Ferrocarril" (2007, 696).

These nations each represented individual ethnic heritages, most of which belong to the wider *Bantu* linguistic group which stretches across much of West and Southern Africa. As Andrews highlights, these groups were already serving a dual function of providing community-grounded mutual aid while participating in the creation of public spectacle and ritual. Emphasizing the cross-class, 'popular' nature of the crowds which these events drew, Andrews foreshadows Candombe's contemporary status as a symbol of the Uruguayan nation, despite its roots in religious and ethnic gatherings.

The idea of the Candombe comparsa would become linked by the early 20th century to the practice of *Carnaval*, again shared by most of Latin-America, in differing conceptions. Uruguayan Carnaval is one of the longest, lasting from mid-January to late February of every year. The core of Uruguayan Carnaval is the celebration of a national *popular culture*, via events put on at neighborhood stages, venues, and on the streets of Montevideo. The construction of popular culture, what Latin American Studies scholars call *lo popular* (the popular), is geared towards the marriage of urban and rural folkloric traditions (Luker N/A, Prado 2016). Lo popular is ideally contemporary, political, and belongs to the masses. Controlled expressions of popular culture are thus important forms of political engagement which effectively constitute the Uruguayan social and political arenas. To this end, the most important (most attended, most participated-in) 'category' of Carnaval is *Murga*, a kind of musical-theater that involves extravagant costumes, vulgar social and political commentary, and can include large brass bands with various types of metal percussion instruments and horns. Murga shares some rhythms with Candombe, but is musically and pragmatically distinct in the explicit political commentary which Murga performances offer. Literary scholar Abril Trigo (1993, 720-21) notes that Murga has historically dominated the stages of Carnaval, while Candombe comparsas have dominated the streets.

Street Comparsa in Montevideo
Depicts a typical Candombe Comparsa during Carnaval of 2018, matching but not in traditional costume. (Creative Commons)

Murga
Depicts a typical Murga group performing at a *Tablado*, or neighborhood stage. Note that both practices use percussion, but the drums of Murga are different, and the focus is not on the drums. Candombe groups also participate in tablados, dressed in similar costumes. (Wikimedia Commons)

The history of the incorporation of Afro-Uruguayan practices into Carnaval is long and contradictory. Reid's book paints an image of the *longue durée* of this incorporation, and thus of Candombe's ascent towards Uruguayan popular culture. He locates the start of this history in the colonial era, when enslaved Uruguayans would participate in festivities, or form their own, by dressing in the clothes of their masters. They would caricaturize White Uruguayans via dance, while at the same time centering their own cosmologies, cultural tropes, and shared musicalities. In Cuba, a similar practice continues to thrive. Linguistic Anthropologist Kristina Wirtz's book Performing Afro-Cuba details the "African Trilogy" (trilogía africana) theatrical form in which blackness is folklorized in the production of a cultural authenticity which is taken to be the genesis of the Cuban national identity (2014, 2-4). Wirtz's work has been a central influence on how I conceptualize Candombe and the processes by which it has been elevated to the national stage.

Later, according to Andrews, White Uruguayans mirrored this practice by painting themselves black and imitating African rhythms, dance, and language. The history of the costumes of the traditional characters of Candombe seems to be located within this mutual mimicry. In fact, the first blackface comparsa explicitly described how their entire performance style was intended to recreate the aesthetics of the older Afro-Uruguayan 'nations' which had inaugurated Candombe a half-century earlier (Andrews 2007, 702). The image of the *lubolo*[2], originally connotating a White candombero in blackface, also emerged at the intersection of these histories – a kind of minstrelsy now practiced by Uruguayans across racial lines. Andrews' history highlights that as early as 1887, Carnaval included 11 Black or lubolo Comparsas out of 19 total parading groups. He notes that this effectively produced a disavowal of Carnaval among the Montevideo elite. In an effort to reclaim the most popular of Carnaval festivities, 1956 saw the official inclusion of the *Desfile de Llamadas* (Concourse of 'Calls') to Carnaval. The Candombe comparsas involved were referred to as *Sociedades de Negros y Lubolos* (Societies of Blacks and Lubolos). This naming tradition has continued to the current day – all Candombe groups participating in Carnaval are considered to be made up of *Negros y Lubolos*.

If the emoción lubola (lubolo emotion/sentiment) is a defining feature of Candombe, one would be hard-pressed to find a clear definition in either the literature or on the streets listening to it in action. But the endurance of the term, paired with the centrality of Blackness to the practice of Candombe, speaks to the importance of this trope to Candombe's popularity. This is true for Afro-Uruguayan participants in the contemporary practice, too. Not just in the ways described above. As Louis Chude-Sokei has argued in the case of Bert Williams, an early 20th century, Black and West-Indian blackface performer in Vaudeville, the centrality of the trope of Blackness to blackface performance genres actually provided a unique opportunity for 'real' Black people to set a new standard for authenticity within the practice (Chude-Sokei 2006, 22-23).

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[2] This term comes from the original blackface comparsas, originally it referred to a specific African ethnicity/origin. Now it is taken to mean any Candombe performer, though still preferential towards White Uruguayans within the practice.

Though under different circumstances, the repopularization of Candombe-like practices by blackface groups in the 1860s and 70s would pave the way for Candombe becoming UNESCO recognized patrimony of Afro-Uruguayans, and not the minstrels who brought Candombe into the public spotlight. Reading this against the grain, we can assume that early counter-performances by Afro-Uruguayans in the late 19th century were guided not only by faithfulness to their own culture, but to careful attention for what tastes the public held. In this sense, both the enduring trope of the lubolo and the celebration of Candombe as an important folkloric tradition demonstrate the contradictory meanings which have marked all stages of its development.

Candombe through the Looking Glass

Far from the comparsas of Carnaval and the decades of activism by people like Sergio Ortuño, I discovered Candombe one late night during the early pandemic, listening to a Spotify-generated playlist. The song was "Señora Diana la vi", by Eduardo Mateo, considered one of the fathers of the 'Candombe-Beat' movement of the late 60s and early 70s. They drew heavily on Brazil's 'Tropicália', a movement of the same era, based on the Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago* (Cannibalist Manifesto), which promoted the fusion of local cultural practices and internationally circulating media to produce new forms of art. The song I heard didn't have the traditional Candombe sounds. In fact, it only had one percussionist and one guitarist, playing bossa nova rhythms and odd jazz chords. Mateo himself wasn't Afro-Uruguayan, either. Candombe was a small element in the musical mix that Mateo put forward via his creative use of the tambores and Uruguayan rhythms from Murga to Milonga, a folkloric musical tradition (itself thought to have derived from Candombe-like rhythms). From this, one might assume that Candombe-Beat was the product of the ultimate art-ification of Candombe – its elevation to the avant-garde. But Mateo's life trajectory tells a different story.

Guilherme de Alencar Pinto, a Brazilian music scholar who has worked in Uruguay for all of his adult life, is the foremost biographer of Mateo. In his book,

Razones Locas ('Crazy Reasons') (de Alencar Pinto 1995), he explains that Mateo grew up in the center of Montevideo for much of his childhood. He was passionate about music from a young age and dropped out of secondary school to become a musician. In particular, he was passionate about Murga, Brazilian music, and Jazz. He and his friends would perform Murgas at Carnaval events and had residencies at bars (Ibid). From a young age, Mateo had also been exposed to Candombe. Candombe's audience had been growing consistently since the emergence of blackface comparsas, which found immense popularity among newly arrived European immigrants. Beyond this, the paintings of Pedro Figari, at the turn of the 20th century, began to romanticize and folklorize Montevideo's Afro-descendent population (Andrews 2010). Later, the release of *Candombe de Vanguardia* (Vanguard Candombe), a set of albums by Uruguayan Jazz musicians of the 1950s, including many Afro-Uruguayan percussionists and multi-instrumentalists had the explicit goal of producing Candombe as a music for export. Mateo was between worlds and the music of Montevideo too was between worlds – innovation and reinvention, between rock and tango and folklore and Candombe.

Pedro Figari painting, “Candombe” (1921)
Museum of Latin American Art in Buenos Aires. (Photo by author, Summer 2024)

Mateo, later in life, formed close friendships with many Candombe musicians, including Ruben Rada, who is arguably the most famous Uruguayan musician of the past 50 years. Mateo suffered from schizophrenia and did not make enough from his music to support himself (de Alencar Pinto 1995). As I later learned from the musician Ferna Nuñez, son of a famous drum luthier, it was Candombe musicians who took him in off the streets when he was struggling (Interview with Ferna Nuñez, Summer 2024). The Candombe world

embraced him and Mateo was indebted to the community they held, frequently attending and playing at Candombe events outside of the Carnaval context. In this way, the worlds he was a part of were both extremely contradictory and part of one larger network in which Uruguayan musicians, including many Afro-Uruguayans, circulated.

This might suggest the opposite of what was assumed above – that Candombe-Beat, and perhaps Candombe more widely, was an egalitarian space, a post-racial musical utopia. But this wasn't true either. The uses of Candombe in much of the music of the time essentialized it down to its most basic rhythm and the use of the Afro-Uruguayan tambor. There was a clear sonic distinction between music which was Candombe (Afro-Uruguayan) and music which *used* Candombe. Yet, Afro-descendant and not, Uruguayans of Mateo's time moved fluidly between these categories of musical production. I tell the story of Mateo because I want to make it clear that racial divisions in Uruguay are not, as discrete as we might assume them to be. Mateo certainly is not remembered today as having appropriated Candombe for personal gain. No activist, not even Sergio Ortuño, would dare to make that claim. Yet Mateo *was* participating in the appropriation of Candombe in an abstract sense – its elevation to the national scene of popular music – its slow march away from its roots as a form of musical expression intended to preserve religious and cultural practices from across the Atlantic.

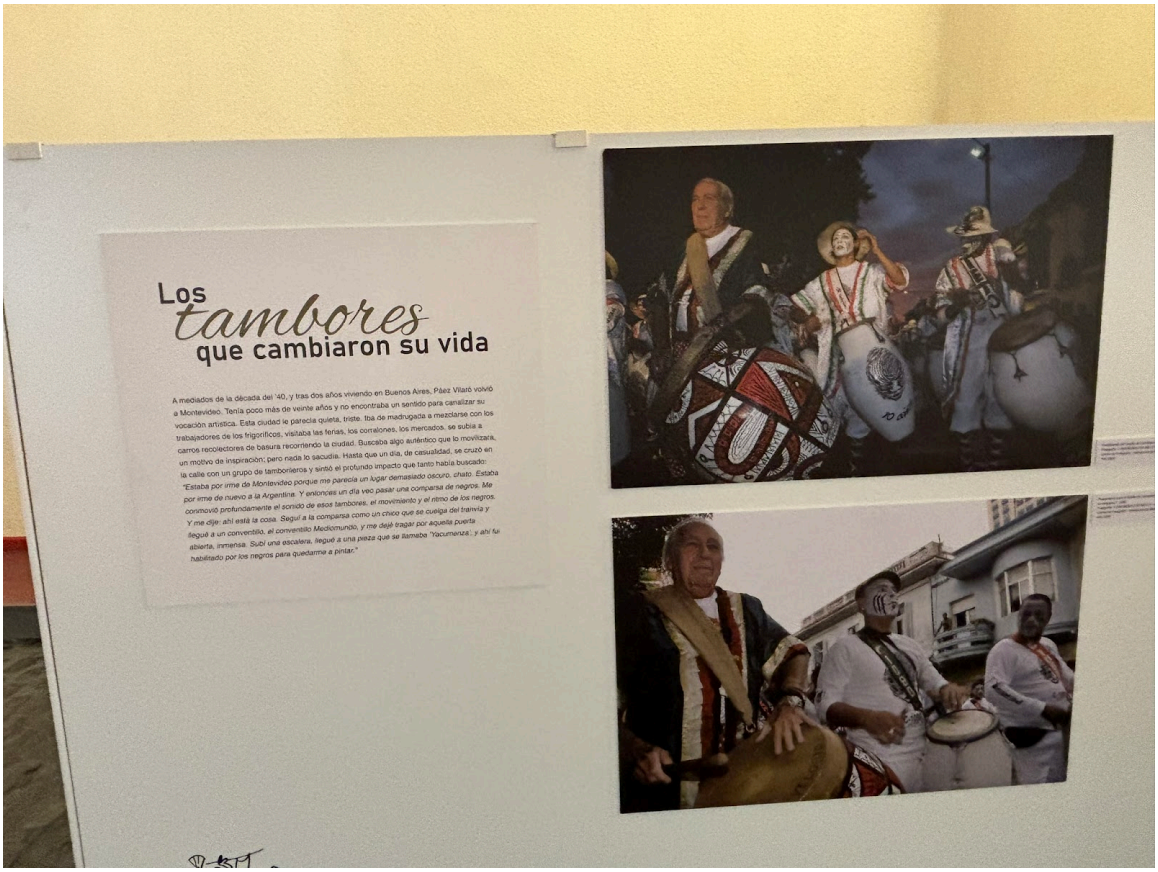
These trends of appropriation and re-appropriation, innovation, and reinvention of tradition, have continued into the current moment. Contemporary comparsas, for example, are likely to be less than 50 percent Afro-Uruguayan, no matter the group or neighborhood being represented. This is surprising, given Afro-Uruguayan communities lived in the center of Montevideo, and made up at least 30 percent of the national population by 1850. In contrast, the population of Uruguayans who identified as Afro-descendant as recently as 2023 is much lower, at about 10-13 percent, depending on the account (INE Uruguay, 2023)[3]. This cultural form, distinctly Afro-Uruguayan, is today dominated

[3] Interestingly, this percentage is the highest recorded in the past century. More Uruguayans have begun to self-identify as Afro-descendant in recent years.

demographically by non Afro-descendants, the majority (self-identifying as White and mestizo) sector of Uruguayan society (Ibid, Interviews with Diego and Sergio, Summer 2024). While this is certainly the product of a larger history of intermixing and cohabitation, it is also the product of the complex personal and interpersonal dynamics of Candombe, and its relevance to Uruguayan politics. Candombe musicians and activists, like Sergio Ortuño, are ambivalent about these processes. Diego Paredes, for example, was adamant about his belief that "The more people that practice Candombe, the happier I am" (Interview with Diego Paredes, Summer 2024). Candombe's value, to him, was held in the form and the histories and contexts that the form of Candombe represents.

At the turn of the 20th century, Uruguay saw a large influx of European immigration, and Afro-Uruguayans occupied a distinct role, recognized in the annual festivities as 'autochthonous' Uruguayans in comparison to these new populations. This new position meant that Candombe became a folkloric symbol, representing that older, creole, Uruguay. The 1956 inclusion of Candombe to Carnaval was the outcome of a two-year old proposition by a cultural organization to bring Afro-Uruguayan culture back to the masses. Yet the municipal government changed the terms of the arrangement, moving the date of the Candombe event from the traditional Candombe celebration during Christmas to the middle of Carnaval, a month and a half later. This choice demonstrated how Candombe was being treated as a practice associated with the performance of Blackness *and* Uruguayanness. Rather than merely give space for Afro-Uruguayan culture, this new event would elevate it to the national stage. This encouraged and enabled an extension of the earlier parodies of Candombe epitomized by the emergence of lubolos[4]. Appropriation and celebration of Candombe went hand in hand. This has crystallized in the contemporary moment as the overlapping and contrasting narratives that Candombe "belongs to us all", "comes from Africa", and "is Afro-Uruguayan culture". It was a common experience during my fieldwork to hear more than one of those claims over the span of 30 seconds when speaking with Candomberos.

[4] See footnote 1, pg. 13



Installation on painter Carlos Paéz Vilaró at Montevideo's Carnaval Museum The title of the texts reads "The drums which changed his life". A portion of the text, a quote from the 'him', reads "I was about to leave Uruguay. But I came across a comparsa of Black people. The sound of the drums moved me so deeply, the movement and the rhythm of the Blacks. I followed them and we ended up at the old tenement complex. We went into a room and they convinced me to stay there to paint". (Photo by author, Summer 2024)

A non-Afro dancer with one of the comparsas I attended, for example, told me "It's great what you're doing. Candombe means a lot to Uruguay. It means a lot to me". I explained to her that my project had to do with the political meanings of Candombe, and the history of Candombe. She said, "you know, I hope you've noticed… these days, it's the Black people that are racist in Candombe". Her clear statement of ownership and pride over Candombe was paired with a feeling that she was being marginalized within the practice. There was seemingly no internal dissonance in her statements – Candombe belonged to all of Uruguay and any projects which attempted to address the parallel histories

of marginalization of Afro-Uruguay were twisting cultural patrimony into politics, and this dancer found that despicable.

Drawing on Wirtz's discussion of Carnaval as a discursive field through which narratives of culture and cultural citizenship are reworked, I view these competing narratives of Candombe as an important indicator of its cultural and political relevance in Uruguayan society. In the case of Carnaval, where the masses become one, this is especially the case. The continued denomination of all Candombe groups as *Negros y Lubolos* reproduces this pairing and naturalizes their unification. Despite that Candombe is widely recognized as the patrimony of Afro-Uruguay, White Uruguayans, often uncritically, consider it their right to participate. While most approach this as a form of genuine engagement with Candombe, there is nevertheless an element of parody present in their historical use of blackface and appropriation of Candombe dress and traditional costumed figures. Russian literary critic Mikhail Baktin (1981, cited in Wirtz 2014) proposes a notion of the Carnavalesque, a mode of literature (and lived experience) in which the traditional divisions of society are broken down via parody. Mikita Brottman, summarizing Bakhtin's concepts, adds that carnivalesque language "parodically reprocesses other people's discourse, but always in such a way as to rob them of their power, to 'distance them from the mouth,'...and thus turn what was direct discourse into light self-parody" (1992). Bakhtin's approach is useful to consider the stakes in the 'carnivalization' of Candombe and Afro-Uruguayan identity.

Race and Performance

In this thesis I understand Candombe in Uruguay by building on interdisciplinary scholarship which has explored the common theme of appropriation of Black cultural forms across the Americas. The basis of this scholarship is the understanding that racial divisions generated by centuries of slavery, conquest, and colonialism, have continued to be relevant in the postcolonial and post-abolition periods. Where slavery and other forms of racial hierarchization served the purposes of economic development and the spread of

religion, abolition and colonial independence meant that these relationships had to be reworked. Beliefs in innate racial differences which had justified slavery and *casta* ideologies of racial classification in Spanish America remained but were adapted to serve new pragmatic political needs.

A central political goal in early independence Latin America was the creation and consolidation of the national sphere, in order to create stronger forms of political authority (Beezley 2018). A challenge to this project were the relatively blurry cultural and political divisions left behind by the imperial system. Creole elites (of recent European ancestry, born in the Americas) in one nation had to find a way to distinguish themselves and their emerging state in opposition to creole elites in the country next door. In order to do this, elites embarked on projects of incorporating racial and ethnic others into the nation-state.

Yet, this project has continually been defined by the development of a process of 'definition by exclusion'. Discourses and associated political imperatives of *Otherness* became a key framework for defining the nation and its citizenry. As Wirtz argues in the case of Cuba, Blackness came to represent an important "internal other" of the state (2014, 45-46). Black people were treated as a colonial afterimage, a resource for development but a threat to political authority. Eventually, struggles between political-economic development and views of racial difference gave way to new forms of racial ideology. Scholars of race and postcolonialism writing in the 1980s and 90s called this new register of racism *cultural racism*, or *cultural fundamentalism*. Stuart Hall (2000), an important cultural theorist and Marxist critic, wrote that the two registers of racism – biological and cultural – operated via a chain of equivalences in which differences in one register were justified and reproduced via the other. This means that biological discourses of race continue to be reproduced via notions of cultural fundamentalism. In the Uruguayan context, this was commonly gestured to by my interlocutors via statements about 'rhythm in the blood'. Wirtz, writing in the Cuban context, notes the same tendency towards an interplay between cultural and biological essentialisms. She writes "To carry a tradition in the blood was a common idiom I heard people repeat to express the

importance of heredity… creating the body as a 'natural' vessel of identity that will enact its identifications… in its appearance and habits" (2014, 91).

In Uruguay, there was no possibility to maintain separate social and economic spheres for Black populations. Much of the Afro-Uruguayan population was located in Montevideo, and had served as domestic or urban labor throughout the colonial and slavery periods. Beyond this, there was already a long history of cultural exchange and syncretism between racial groups in Montevideo. Uruguayan Carnaval, for example, had emerged as a space in which these different sectors of society came together on a regular basis and reconstituted social and political boundaries. Members of the cultural elite felt that these popular forms needed to be controlled and shaped in order to be productive in creating a unitary national identity. The particular meanings of Black cultural practices, and the contexts in which they were performed, became important to the maintenance of public order. This is because Candombe events operated as popular spaces, welcoming crowds of mixed racial identities and offering an alternate form of community which was not based in racial or class-based hierarchies (Andrews 2010).

In the present context, the simultaneous celebration of Candombe as the national rhythm and intangible cultural heritage of Afro-Uruguay begs the question of how performance has mediated and continues to mediate, problematize, and reproduce political narratives of Blackness and Afro-Uruguayan identity. As Andrews writes, "Ultimately, however, it was not structural forces that composed the songs, wrote the lyrics, and played, sang, and danced them. Rather, in Uruguay as in other countries, it was individual musicians and performers, Black and White, male and female, who created and reworked these new forms in a never-ending cycle of renewal and innovation" (2010, 18).

If we take seriously the idea that these political narratives of culture are not only located in structure, but also in their performance, then we must propose a framework by which individuals of diverse identities come to inhabit culture and particular mobilizations of culture. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of *dialogism* provides a useful jumping-off point for my own methodological approach to agency. It proposes that individuals' voices, and indexically, their

identities, are constructed via a constant dialogue with others'. The relationships between voices, including broader societal and political categories, are not egalitarian. They are steeped in relationships of authority. For example, if a legal form asks you to check a box marking that you are either White or Black, your choice has real consequences, establishing your relationship with highly contextualized "scripts" associated with each category. Suddenly, there is an imperative to perform or to relate to yourself via the label which you have chosen (or had conferred upon you). As Kristina Wirtz argues, social actors are constantly in the process of negotiating "stances by drawing on available semiotic repertoires and frameworks, including those indexing racial identifications and meanings…" (Wirtz 2014, 67). She cites Butler's claim that "performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance" (Butler 1993 in Wirtz 2014, 68).

Performativity in the everyday involves the particular ways in which you come to inhabit and rupture hegemonic types. The particular ways you mobilize your voice are salient because they have the ability to rework the categories themselves in limited fashion. Wirtz highlights this fact, writing that "because iterative processes are responsible for the social construction of meaning, there is always the potential for subversion, redirection, repurposing, and even reappropriation of discursive objects and thus for the emergence of alternative racial subjectivities" (Ibid, 69). In the case of race's social construction, this points to both the 'objective' and 'subjective' effects of racialization: concepts of race both ascribe presupposed identities and provide opportunities for redefinition.

The ultimate inability of structure to enforce singular meanings upon individuals is what makes controlling the meanings of culture important. Latin American Studies scholar George Yúdice makes the claim that this is *The Expediency of Culture* (2003). Culture has become an important political object because it establishes the boundaries within which you are able to voice your identity, but also through which you live your daily life. This challenges the traditional anthropological views of culture as either unconscious habits or rigid structure. Instead, under this framework, culture becomes a contested *semiotic system*, by which meanings and behaviors are (de)linked and contextualized in society. This has been explored by a multitude of other scholars through the

claim that culture has become commodified. When culture becomes a commodity, there is value in having more of it, and having certain kinds of it. It gains you political and social forms of authority.

Beyond this, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1986) has noted how this operates in contexts which structure interpretations of monetary value, via his concept of *regimes of value*. Regimes of value inform how we process and respond to all objects, including other individuals. We embody regimes of value through our interventions, and we reproduce them in interactions with others. The most basic regime of value is monetary. As a framework, it entails that we view money as exchangeable for nearly any other commodity. In everyday actions, we routinely exchange money for goods in more-than abstract ways. Discourses of race, too, act as regimes of value. Clothing choices, language use, and other forms of self-expression are interpreted differently according to your racial position. Other scholars, such as the linguistic anthropologist Krystal Smalls, have expanded this via the concept of *racial semiotics* by which both racial signs, such as bodily features, and interpretations of these signs by others, come to produce and contextualize particular notions of race (2020, 233-243).

Wirtz claims that race's links to the body become "natural indexes", meaning that they serve to anchor observable features to racial categories in such a manner that they transcend any particular racial schema (2014, 16). At the same time, under the dually pigmentocratic and *mestizo* logics of Latin American society, these natural indexes have lost their strength in accurately locating subject and object positions. Instead, like representations of culture, somatic features have become semiotic resources ready to be mobilized towards distinctly performative ends. During my fieldwork, I came across many racially ambiguous (according to somatic features) individuals who seemed to curate identities based in both tokens of physical appearance and cultural practice. Many of these individuals who I came across at Candombe events had dreadlocks, for instance, creating both a physical marker of their identities and linking it to the social contexts in which they circulate. Often walking the line between appropriation and celebration of cultural heritage, these individuals are usually taken to be *Afro.* To a greater degree than in the US, this suggested to me

that performativity plays a significant role in practices of racial recognition and self-identification in Uruguay.

This example demonstrates how in Uruguay, certain regimes of value regarding racial identity have taken precedence over others. In particular, minstrelsy within Carnaval, which has entailed the caricaturizing of Afro-Uruguayans and the appropriation of their musical tradition, has continually structured the ways in which Black cultural practices are conceptualized by hegemonic, White and Mestizo, sectors of society (Andrews 2007, 704-705). It has produced Blackness as backwards, yet spectacular – and linked the expression of Blackness inextricably to its parody by non-Black sectors of society. In this way, Blackness remains both linked to Black bodies and to the circulated, disembodied depictions of Black forms of culture, which nonetheless continued to serve as important sites for Afro-Uruguayan self-identification.

In many ways, the implications of this process mirror African-American intellectual and interdisciplinary scholar W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) notion of "double consciousness". Double consciousness is produced because those who are 'othered' by hegemony have no choice but to see themselves via that dominant framework (1903, I). Though Du Bois' original conceptualization was intended to describe the dispossessions of African-Americans through American racism, Black Studies scholars have followed Du Bois' logic to conceptualize of other kinds of dispossession produced under the same conditions. The term "triple consciousness", attributed to the African-American journalist Sara Lomax-Reese, has been used to address the 'intersectionality' of the embodied effects of racialization with those of gender. Still further, other scholars have considered the embodied effects of nationalist cultural and political hegemonies.

Du Bois maintained that there were strategies by which the 'veil' of double consciousness could be lifted, and Black people could find freedom of expression. One such strategy was the resignification of Black cultural forms via the legitimation of Black artistic expression and the celebration of shared culture (Ibid, I, XIV). His suggestion that this could eventually lead to the reconceptualization of Blackness in dominant society demonstrates the overall tension I have attempted to highlight in this section – between structure and agency, race, and performance. On another level, the idea of 'reconceptualizing

Blackness' points to what Louis Chude-Sokei calls the development of a "sub-hegemonic" conception of Blackness, mired to "a black modernism that was hardening its own racial borders and becoming intolerant of its margins through an often parochial language of 'soul' or racial identity" (Chude-Sokei 2006, 12). As Chude-Sokei writes earlier in the introduction to his book on Bert Williams, a West-Indian, Black blackface performer of the early 20th century, his work "should be read as a corrective to the growing nationalistic chauvinism of an African American cultural politics that, despite its resistance and marginalization, veered too often toward an exceptionalism that severely limited the transnational borders of race and culture" (Ibid, 6). I interpreted this to be emphasizing the complex interplay between different forms of White American hegemony.

On the one hand, racialization and the double consciousness it produces led African-Americans to develop life-saving, forms of race-based solidarity geared towards the achievement of cultural and political sovereignty. On the other, American exceptionalism and generations of (limited) integration into wider American society ensured that widely circulated images of Blackness were centered around the legacies, languages, and cultural forms which emerged from southern slavery. In this way, the counterhegemonic strategy of Black Nationalism was limited by the discursive bases of the nationalism and racism against which it was working.

In the context of Candombe, an analysis which takes these factors into account must take seriously the different semiotic types by which narratives of Blackness are constructed and disseminated in Uruguayan society. It must also reckon with the construction of a 'sub-hegemonic' Afro-Uruguayan community for which participation in Candombe and, by proxy, reproduction of its typified tropes and histories serve as one axis of citizenship. Carnaval and related cultural forms are one such site of this process, but another is the production of a national 'popular music' via the commercial music industry as it developed over the course of the 20th century.

Popular Music, Folklore, and the Nation

A key aspect of my methodological approach is an emerging relationship between the fields of cultural and musical semiotics. A semiotic approach privileges the processes by which meanings are produced and embodied within a community. This parallels the critiques of capital-C Culture in anthropology and genre within ethnomusicology and linguistic anthropology. Rather than chart abstract systems (capital-C Culture, genre) which we conceptualize as structuring individual behavior (or musical performance), we should focus on charting the processes by which these abstract systems are summoned into being via people themselves. These critiques suggest that we take genres as discursive categories which structure musical form and practice, ultimately bringing individuals together.

An important example of how this approach can be applied rests in folk music and international folklorist ideologies. Ross Cole's *The Folk* (2021) takes seriously the idea that the category of 'the folk' is not a given. The people that represent the folk, he argues, must be forged from the nameless masses, as part of discourses which are explicitly linked to the political and cultural organization of society, and which carry with them implicit notions of history, contemporary reality, and the kinds of futures we strive for.

The category of 'folk music' exemplifies this process well by demonstrating the reflexive nature of the relationship between these developing discourses, and the music itself. For example, early folk music was collected from the field, by folklorists in the late 19th and turn of the 20th century. The songs were meant to be anonymous, passed down by oral tradition and preserved by these musicologists. Yet by 1960, folk music was becoming commercialized – shifting away from its anonymized authors and archivistic singers towards celebrity singer-songwriters and community organizers. Despite these major shifts in many aspects of folk music production – its musicality, its typical performers, and its performance contexts – the popular notions of who 'the folk' actually were stayed largely the same. Folk songs continued to allude to America's poor and exploited underclass, mostly poor White men and their

families, and to simple, traditional American ways of life, despite its new urban, middle-class exterior.

Similarly, Candombe as a genre is embroiled in conversations about the category of a unitary Uruguayan national identity, as well as the construction of an Afro-Uruguayan history and identity which brings them into a dominant national sphere. Thus, the practices of and meanings emerging within Candombe are made to represent their practitioners – Afro-Uruguayans and Uruguayans as bounded groups. Different practices of Candombe might serve distinct political agendas or personal identities but taken as part of larger societal narratives of internal racial and cultural divisions, Candombe will continue to reproduce these categories. *Negros y Lubolos* again appears as a perfect example through which this process operates.

From folk music we can think of the broader category of 'popular music'. Ethnomusicologist Morgan Luker draws a set of explicit comparisons between Latin American discourses of 'popular culture' and North American 'folklorism' (Luker N/A)[5]. The first is that while we conceptualize 'the folk' as a rural phenomenon, 'lo popular' is located as belonging to the urban masses, who hold the most threatening position to cultural and political hegemony. Yet, an interesting caveat to this perspective is that popular culture in Latin America, and certainly explicitly in Uruguay, draws notions of historicity, authenticity, and political relevance from the rural, which is ideally located temporally as belonging to a colonial or otherwise far-off past. This dual nature of 'popularity' is what produces it as a key category of cultural practice – it produces the urban masses via their constitutive counterpart, the rural. In Uruguay, defining popular culture has always meant clearly identifying a source for each practice. Each genre within the popular culture canon operates to construct separate (yet dialogically positioned) elements of Uruguayan society as a whole. Murga, for example, is often taken to index the influx of European migrants throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. Payada, a rural, folkloric genre, contrastingly indexes the Gaucho culture and an older 'creole' history (Ayestaran 1967).

[5] Review essay was provided as required reading for Morgan Luker's course, *Latin American Popular Musics*. No date was given.

Candombe, within these logics, indexes Afro-Uruguayan culture and comes to represent the ultimate unification of Uruguayan society, which is seen to overcome racial and other historical divisions. In fact, the prime text on Uruguayan musical folklore, written by Lauro Ayestaran in 1967, precisely breaks musical folklore up into creole, urban, and Afro-Uruguayan genres.

There are also pragmatic aspects to the production of commercial popular music over the course of the 20th century. Popular music helped prop up national economies and became a way to distinguish the nation from others in the international cultural marketplace. The search for 'lo popular' was thus also a search for 'lo Uruguayo' (Uruguayanness), which was necessarily located in explicit contrast to Argentineness or Brazilianness. The authors featured in *Cultural Nationalism and Ethnic Music in Latin America* (2018), a collection of studies edited by William Beezley, similarly demonstrate the use of music as a politics of cultural distinction and national consolidation across the course of the 20th century. They point to the development of a 'revolutionary' music genre in early 20th century Mexico, and to the development of Brazilian popular music precisely as Brazil was plunged into a military dictatorship, as evidence for the relevance of musical genres to nationalized politics (2018 21-24). This was certainly true in Uruguay. The incorporation of Candombe's musical form to recorded music was first achieved via tango musicians in the early decades of the 20th century. By the time of Candombe's official incorporation to Carnaval, in 1956, Candombe was being recognized as a distinct musical aspect of national folklore, one which could be utilized to produce a 'music for export' (Picún 2010, Torrón 2015).

In this way, Candombe occupies an interesting position within Uruguayan musicological discourse. It is urban, but not *popular*, located in the present via Carnaval and its use in popular music. This simultaneous location of Candombe in the rural past, as a piece of folklore, and in the urban present is threatening because it embodies claims to authenticity *and* hybridity, as a new form of musical citizenship and political agency. These disparate conceptions operate in conjunction with larger claims about the relationship between culture and the nation.

Locating the Limits of Performance: A Multi-sited Ethnography and Analysis

In this thesis, I track Candombe as both a discursive *and* musical object across time and across different kinds of Candombe practice. Through three chapters, I identify and document the sonic and performative aspects of three 'realms' of Candombe – Candombe *Callejero*, Candombe in *Música Popular Uruguaya*, and Candombe *Fusión*. These realms are different kinds of spaces in which Candombe is mobilized musically and culturally, according to distinct logics of practice. Candombe Callejero, for example, is defined sonically and musically via the specific interaction of the three types of drums, and the use of distinct rhythms depending on your neighborhood and comparsa, or drum troupe. It is a 'street practice', oriented towards Carnaval but which has a distinct culture and popular following which operates year-round. Contrastingly, the 'Candombe' element within Música Popular Uruguaya is a lot more slippery. In certain instances, a song can mobilize notions of Candombe via the inclusion of the main Candombe rhythm, played on instruments other than the Afro-Uruguayan tambor. Conversely, a song can use the drums to play other kinds of rhythms not associated with Afro-Uruguayan musical practice. It's even common for Candombe to be used strictly as a lexical marker through which a song becomes distinctly Uruguayan[6]. In this way, Candombe cannot be defined as a set of musical or sonic practices. It must be considered as a set of competing discourses and performances which are dependent upon certain codified aspects of Candombe performance.

Following from this, and running parallel to these codified kinds of practices, are competing cultural politics of personal and collective identity. In the context of Candombe, I sketch the frameworks through which aspects of Candombe practice have become part of larger societal narratives in Uruguay. Specifically, I am interested in how certain aspects of discourse become

[6] Songs such as Hablan por la Espalda's "Candombe del temporal" and Niquel's "Candombe de la aduana" demonstrate this process within the past twenty years of Música Popular Uruguaya.

embodied and are reproduced via Candombe's musical practice, and certain musical practices have become integral to explicit discourses surrounding Candombe. The movement of symbolic, meaningful, semiotic objects from practice towards discourse and back again is a key part of the mutual reproduction of Candombe as a societal category. Wirtz, for instance, highlights that the constant repetition and reiteration of "performance-objects", leads to these objects being taken up in hegemonic discourse (Wirtz 2014, 67, 68). Iteration, as described by Judith Butler, encompasses performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler 1993, 2). The complexity lies in the fact that this process allows for a multiplicity of Candombes, practiced differently and conceived of in different ways, yet unified through the circulation of specific semiotic objects, which sustain its societal position. Because of this, looking at performance alone cannot always enable us to look beyond their hegemonic contextualizations. An individual performance is a part of a much larger chain of reiteration and reinvention, which depend on much more than the details of performance – pointing to how each performance is interpreted and cited by others in ways which the performer is ultimately unable to control (Butler 1993).

George Yúdice draws on anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's (1989) concept of "cultural citizenship" to claim that culture, constructed here as a set of shared practices, is a democratizing force by consolidating social membership and establishing a set of shared imperatives for social and political participation (Yúdice 2003, 21'-22). This occurs on the level of performance, where the circulation and reproduction of objects via reiterative practices produces shared experiences among participants and observers (Wirtz 2014, 69). Broadly speaking, this aspect of cultural citizenship refers to the production of a sense of belonging and solidarity with others through shared ritual and worldview, and secondarily to how subaltern cultural practices offer a site for critique and reformulation of identity and social groups. This is true because the reiterative nature of performance enables individuals to write subtle intentions and new citations into the performance of already-established identities and practices.

Culture is also valuable at the institutional level, where, for Yúdice, cultural citizenship has taken on a valuable role in establishing the contours of

the nation as an imagined community. Yúdice discusses this process as "cultural managerialism", whereby cultural objects can be shaped by groups of cultural elites in nation states. Yúdice writes "culture has no 'in itself': it is a resource for politics" (Yúdice 2003, 23). This claim suggests that culture cannot be viewed as a distinct category from other forces which order society. Beyond this, culture can only be understood in relation to 'other' cultural forms. The definition of cultural identity via "constitutive otherness" leaves culture an empty sign, dependent on context for any kind of real meaning to be read. In Yúdice's words, "the result is that politics trumps the content of culture" (Ibid, 23). In my own words, this indicates the importance of investigating 'uses' of culture for their layered intentions and valences.

In Uruguay, the management of culture and the governance of the public have always been closely tied. For example, the official incorporation of Candombe into Carnaval came with the establishment of a separate category of Carnaval specifically for the practice, run by the government of the city of Montevideo. The city government also establishes the monetary value of prize pools for the different categories of Carnaval, effectively managing the kind of culture that pays (Picún 2010, 82, 88; La Diaria 2025).

While performances of Candombe between individuals may be more similar than dissimilar, their terms of engagement, identities, histories, and intentions are what breathe meaning into performance. Finding the 'limits of performance' thus requires looking at how ideology and cultural politics make meaning of performance as much as the particularities of performance become a part of popular discourse.

For example, public discourse ascribes Candombe as, on the one hand, the essentialization of Afro-Uruguayan identity, and, on the other, the reconciliation of the whole of Uruguay, the integration of Uruguayan Blackness to Uruguayan hegemonic cultural forms. These two are complementary pieces of the same discourse, in which Candombe is both biologically and culturally tied to Afro-Uruguayans *and* recognized as occupying a universal position in Uruguayan society. This addresses both aspects of cultural citizenship. On the one hand, how elites consolidate national identity via shaping the terms of engagement with culture, especially for minoritized groups. Other the other hand, how claims

to cultural difference serve as an important site for belonging for those same minoritized groups.

These are fairly innocuous discourses to most Uruguayans – they don't tend to see anything wrong with them. Most Afro-Uruguayans activists with whom I've spoken see value in a universalization of Candombe, while still claiming a *performative authority* to the genre via their racial identities. By performative authority, I refer to what is often casually referred to as 'authenticity'. Rather than view authenticity and authorship as inherent, given categories, performative authority emphasizes the relevance of strategic deployment of identity in relation to or via performance. Performative authority thus captures how dominant discourses around Candombe place Afro-Uruguayans at its center, and how Afro-Uruguayans mobilize and perform this authority over Candombe's practice.

Beyond this, Candombe is also integral to touristic and historical discourses as the "sound of the city", which is the title of a book on Candombe by a Montevideo, Milita Alfaro. The rhythm is embodied by Montevideans of all walks of life. When the Uruguayan national soccer team scores in a match, it's the Candombe clave that they clap. On national holidays, at the opening of new buildings and new factories, Candombe musicians are hired or invited to perform. Candombe musicians' names are memorized, and they're known by their nicknames. In a city of a million and a half, everyone knows *somebody* who is a candombero. Abroad, too, the Uruguayan diaspora is known to form small Candombe groups in cities as small as Gothenburg, Sweden and Elizabeth, New Jersey (El Observador 2018, Club Uruguayo de Elizabeth NJ, 2019, Facebook). But the particularities of the practices of Candombe vary widely – the kinds of drums, the histories invoked in lyrics and artwork displayed on drums. The ability of politics to 'trump' content is what allows for practice to be resignified en masse in official discourses. It's in this way that the use of Candombe within 'Afro' activism in Montevideo is incorporated into official discourses about Afro-Uruguayan pride and distinctive identity, despite the intentions of Afro-Uruguayan activists who hope to demonstrate a much more nuanced view of their cultural identities. Along the same lines, the use of Candombe within popular music is often leveraged in official discourses as a sign of a unitary

national identity, despite its fairly recent integration into the canon and the lack of serious engagement with the violent histories of slavery and minoritization which have continually dispossessed the Afro-Uruguayan community.

My methodology, in turn, must take both performativity and hegemony seriously, to ask questions about how Candombe operates discursively across different modes of practice. I build on ethnomusicologist Peter Wade's claims that performances of Blackness in Colombian music, despite often articulating concrete critiques of the state and of Colombian racisms, are a constitutive element of Colombian national music and national identity. Wade's ultimate claim is that "a nationalist project does not just try to deny, suppress or even simply channel an unruly diversity; it actively reconstructs it" (1997, 3). In Wade's investigation, music takes on an ambivalent yet relevant position within the nation. In the context of widespread appropriation and overlapping meanings of Candombe, 'what does it mean for music to represent you?'.

This is useful in understanding the concept of culture as resource (Yúdice 2003). Culture, as a set of embodied practices, is a physical resource from which discourse is chiseled. Thus, aesthetics of practice, such as the communal, loud, and joyous nature of public Candombe troupes, are key to historical narratives in which Candombe is a symbol of the conviviality and intersubjectivity of the Uruguayan cultural identity. Conversely, practice itself is structured by discourse, shifting to serve distinct social functions. Candombe troupes have grown considerably in size in the past few decades, have changed their rhythms and become less identity-focused in membership. One limitation or caveat to this process is that one must consider the ideas of dialogism and heteroglossia in which discourses are embodied consciously and skeptically, as resources for selfhood and agency. Thus, while Candombe street practice has become significantly more diverse (and less distinctly Afro-Uruguayan) the emphasis on Afro-Uruguayans as the 'source' of the tradition has allowed them a privileged position as leaders of troupes and figures of discursive authority. Thus, many Afro-Uruguayan candombe practitioners are cognizant of the histories of appropriation and incorporation of Candombe, and continue to practice it, or utilize it towards other ends, because it validates their identities and

communities, builds grassroots power, and requires that non-Afro participants listen to and learn the practice from Afro-Uruguayans.

Conclusions and Limitations

My thesis aims to contextualize and detail the cultural politics of Candombe, their limitations, and their skeptical embodiment by actors of varied positionality within Uruguayan society. To do so, I draw on historiography of Uruguay, Uruguayan folklore, and Uruguayan music. I similarly draw on implied historical narratives in interviews with Uruguayan musicians, historians, journalists, and activists. I document a variety of perspectives, hoping to center the narratives and histories proposed by Afro-Uruguayan interlocutors and Candombe practitioners, whose position is all the more precarious as figures validated and excluded from political identities via Candombe. This is most difficult in the realms of Uruguayan folklore and Música Popular, but I rely on previous scholarship, lyrical analysis, and personal histories to understand the dialogic processes that accompanied the appropriation of Candombe into the world of popular culture.

A text that I am infinitely indebted to in this regard is Uruguayan musicologist/semiotician Olga Picún's dissertation "El Candombe y la Música Popular Uruguaya" (2010) which traces the development of three different mobilizations of Candombe in relation to the development of Uruguayan Popular Music across the second half of the 20th century. While her work provides a valuable academic perspective on the semiotic processes by which Candombe became an important national cultural, political, and musical symbol, it also reproduces dominant cultural narratives surrounding Candombe which continue into the present day. Picún, for example, was instrumental in the production of a book in conjunction with the Uruguayan Ministry of Education and Culture, entitled Patrimonio Vivo del Uruguay, Relevamiento del Candombe (The Living Patrimony of Uruguay, a survey of Candombe, 2020). Her emphasis on semiotics located within the practice of Candombe allows her to contextualize and narrativize the 'universalization' of Candombe within

Uruguay, but in doing so she reifies certain claims about the aesthetics and practice of Candombe. One such commonly evoked claim construes Candombe as a site for political resistance, in turn justifying its appropriation by highlighting Candombe's role as an important source of mutual aid and community building for many Uruguayans. Many Afro-Uruguayan interlocutors, especially Candomberos, mirrored this claim by insisting that while Candombe was not 'explicitly' political, the ways in which it had been practiced, and its symbolic value for differently positioned Uruguayan communities, meant that it had become deeply intertwined with the 'aesthetics of political resistance' in Uruguay. These claims both refer to the popularization of Candombe during the 1974-83 military dictatorship as a site for disruption of state control of public space and as a site for the expression of solidarity within an imagined Uruguayan political community (Picún 2010, 14, 17). While this process was a product of a specific historical moment, its implications rest in the continual location of these imagined aesthetics in specific forms and aspects of Candombe practice.

In light of these claims, I consider the limits of performativity as a form of agency and selfhood. In doing so, I argue for a cultural and musical semiotics that is dialogic, polyvocal, and open to contradiction. While I make claims about wider Uruguayan historical and cultural trends, my ethnography is contemporary and based on fieldwork done in the dead of winter, far from the sounds, smells, and conviviality of Uruguayan Carnaval. I cannot pretend to understand what Uruguayans –*Afro* or not – feel when dancing or drumming alongside one another. Instead, I document a limited set of perspectives and attempt to generalize frameworks through which these perspectives become salient. For this, my thesis is a product of my conversations with Diego Paredes of the comparsa *Valores Ansinsa*, Nandy Cabrera -- a DJ, musician, artist, and archivist under the name *Selectorchico*, Ferna Nuñez, Agustina Meza, Sergio Ortuño, and Andrés Torrón, among others. My thesis is an amalgam of their narratives as much as my own, and I am similarly indebted to the support they provided as I navigated my first fieldwork in a city and culture unfamiliar to me.