

iles into the country showed what appeared to be a transformation in the Batista government's tactics.<sup>70</sup> Whereas the political opposition questioned the elections of 1954 in which Batista, as the sole candidate, was named president of the Republic, the momentary reestablishment of the constitution "opened up the possibility of dialogue" across different political sectors.<sup>71</sup> Hence, the temporal space for public debate allowed the *Carteles* critic to intersect his political views with his television criticism. And it was also via the restoration of the constitution that, as Nuñez Rodríguez wrote in one of his columns, the proposed commission to regulate entertainment content was deemed unconstitutional: "The Reviewing Commission for Radio and Television Serialized Programs does violate Article 33 of the Constitution because it refers to the free expression of ideas in the form of radio and TV novels [radio and television soaps]. Unless Senator Illas believes that novels, be they emitted on radio, on television, or as books, do not express ideas."<sup>72</sup> Anchored in Cuba's modernity and a supposed path toward a democratic present and future, the plans to legally intervene in television did not materialize in 1955.<sup>73</sup>

But the absence of a legal office to scrutinize scripts did not preclude the Ministry of Communication from supervising entertainment shows. Even though the CRE highlighted its strong hand in fighting indecency on television, and even as critics forcefully advocated for the state not to intervene in entertainment programming, they were unsuccessful in stopping the government's close surveillance of the medium.<sup>74</sup> By the summer of 1955, the Ministry of Communication was in full force, assessing morality on entertainment shows.<sup>75</sup> Three main areas dominated its battle against indecency and immorality on television: racialized dance performances, child actors, and men in drag. While this echoed some of the CRE's morality rules, as seen in the ministry's focus on female dancers' movements, clothing, and Afro-Cuban rhythms,<sup>76</sup> for the most part, the government office set morality standards that the CRE then appropriated.

The minister of communication's interest in Afro-Cuban music and dance was associated with some of the performances that were broadcast on variety shows. Although in 1954 the CRE banned the "transmissions of programs that stimulate beliefs against civilization" and "choreographed dances associated with cults or religious beliefs," some Afro-Cuban religiously derived dances still made it onto television.<sup>77</sup> For example, in one of his reviews of programming during 1955, Alberto Giró chastised television producers

for allowing children to perform music associated with Afro-Cuban religious practices: "The Commission on Radio and Television Ethics, which has achieved so many successes in its brilliant work of refining the radio and TV programs, . . . would do well to pay a little attention to the need in this environment to watch over children's programs, thus protecting the moral health of children. . . . In some children's programs we have seen beautiful children dancing to African rhythms and even singing a lyric that not even adults who are familiar with barbaric sects can understand."<sup>78</sup>

Besides openly expressing his racist attitudes, Giró's words underline the complexities of censoring television. The live broadcast technology made it difficult to effectively control content. Hence, to help with the eradication of racial, religious, and sexual indecencies, the Ministry of Communication joined forces with the CRE. The two organizations worked together to suppress televised signs linked to the nation's *mulataje* and noncontained blackness. In the words of the *Bohemia* critic: "It was not only the [dancers'] garments that worried those who were severely judging our television. Dance also suffered the effects of the regulations. . . . Our dances—rumbas, conga, mambo, chachachá—that made the interpreters move according to those rhythms would be also affected. Those rhythms that, because of their exotic amalgamation of the tropics and their African influence, have been a success across different latitudes would have, it seems, to be adulterated in their place of origin."<sup>79</sup>

It should be clear that black singers and musicians continued to participate in variety and musical shows. The problem was not the presence of black bodies on television; it was the types of performances enacted on television. Anything that digressed from European languages, religious traditions, and bourgeois norms of sexual conduct provoked racial and sexual anxieties and, as a result, could not be aired.

The fixation of the Ministry of Communication and the CRE on elements associated with Afro-Cuban vernacular cultures occurred in a moment when black communities and religious traditions were at the center of intellectual dialogues. In 1954, Cuban intellectual Lydia Cabrera published her seminal work, *El monte*, a book that documents Afro-Cuban religious traditions. A meticulously researched anthropological work, *El monte* made a mark by uncovering religious practices and ceremonies from Santería and other African-based religions.<sup>80</sup> This exposure of rituals most likely influenced choreographers, who, responding to the intellectual dialogues

of the time, exalted Afro-Cuban folklore in televised dance performances. Furthermore, throughout the 1950s, the renowned Casino Tropicana choreographer "Rodney" (Rodrigo Neyra) had been including Afro-Cuban cultural elements in his cabaret shows.<sup>81</sup> High-profile cultural attention like this probably influenced the citation of Afro-Cuban religious references on television. Of course, not all Cubans appreciated this aspect of the island's society and culture. The debate over the morality and value of Afro-Cuban culture, then, demonstrates the dichotomies between the intellectual and artistic spheres and the economic elite, even though, in most cases, Cuban intellectuals came from those same elite groups (as Cabrera did). Still, given that television was seen as an important site to display Cuba's European/cultural modernity, not even the folklore exalted by upper-class intellectuals could be screened.

The topic of Afro-Cuban folklore and racialized sexuality trickled down to other areas beyond mamboletas and musicians: as the *Diario de la Marina* critic noted, "we have seen beautiful children dancing to African rhythms."<sup>82</sup> Children, based on this quote, were not merely watching immoral content on television; those working in the industry were confronting immorality on a daily basis. Thus, to protect their well-being, the Ministry of Communication banned child actors from working in the industry. This new rule surprised television owners, critics, and audience members. Even the most conservative of the television reviewers, Alberto Giró, expressed his dissatisfaction with the measure, indicating that it was "excessively drastic and unfair."<sup>83</sup> Others, including an audience member, worried about the financial stability of child actors, some of whom used their salaries to help sustain their families.<sup>84</sup> Although the CRE publicly explained that child actors did not participate in shows that contained adult content, the organization was unsuccessful in its attempts to stop the ban. After 1955, the youngest actors on Cuban television were fourteen years old.

The third area of censorship—men in drag—was more controversial than the exclusion of children. Here the debates not only related to the elimination of characters that the audience loved, or the CRE's possible favoring of a particular network; the act of cross-dressing introduced a new topic into the discussions about morality on television: sexual orientation.<sup>85</sup> By screening men in drag, censors argued, television promoted homosexuality. This connection between men in drag and homosexuality could be seen as a product of Latin America's *machista* culture, which, as literary scholar Ben Sifuentes-

Jáuregui writes, permeates ideologies of gender, sexuality, and sex. In this regard, masculinity is hegemonically heterosexual, invariably situating any gender transgressions as signs of sexual aberrations. "Sexual difference and perversions—whether transvestism, prostitution, male homosexuality and lesbianism, even womanhood—are readily projected upon the transvestite's body."<sup>86</sup> Thus, following Sifuentes-Jáuregui's argument, cross-dressing performers destabilized hegemonic notions of femininity, masculinity, and appropriate sexual conduct, positioning men in drag as symbols of homosexual behavior.

The merging of men in drag and homosexual desire was based on two main issues: the characters' inability to convey a real representation of women, and the messages that these imperfect representations might convey about sexual desire. Faulty gender performances were first enacted by Pirula, a character who made occasional appearances on a variety show. Performed by a man with a mustache, Pirula was frequently seen flirting with the show's master of ceremonies. In this particular case, the censors focused on how the imperfect performance of gender and femininity (i.e., a woman with a mustache supposedly cannot be a woman) created a space for homosexual desire.<sup>87</sup> Drag, as Katrin Sieg notes, "maximizes the demand on the spectatorial faculty of suspending disbelief if it is to be viewed as a plausible representation of reality."<sup>88</sup> Pirula's inadequate femininity exposed the performance act, opening the possibility for audiences to read sexual desire between two men. A similar logic was used for the other women characters performed by men (Mamacusa and Prematura). These characters did not have facial hair, meaning that, according to standards of femininity, they could "pass" as women. Nonetheless, the public was aware that men were behind the characterizations. Even though one television critic insisted that these characters were read as women ("Mamacusa is not a man, she is a tragic old spinster"), and another critic indicated that television was not to blame for sexual aberrations ("It is unfair to blame radio and television for the problem regarding sexual deviance. . . . One cannot accuse radio [and television] of being a vehicle that transmits or promotes that scourge [and television] which has its deep roots in medicine and the penal law"), the Ministry of Communication prohibited men in drag on television.<sup>89</sup> This prohibition repositioned television as a heteronormal space void of performative gender transgressions. Together with the previous decrees, men and women on television would now continue to act within socially constructed parameters

of femininity and masculinity, which encompassed clothing styles, manners, and interactions with the opposite sex. Those who tried to cross the boundaries—men in drag, dancers wearing inappropriate/revealing clothing, or singers performing songs with sexual innuendo—were banned or suspended from television.

Proper behavior, as discussed earlier, also involved religious traditions. Anything that departed from Catholic/Christian religious practices could not be depicted or addressed on television. Hence, Afro-Cuban religiously derived songs and dances needed to be eliminated not only because they deviated from Catholic/Christian doctrines but also because they were visual and oral reminders of the non-European ethnic/racial elements that were part of Cuba's culture and society. Even though Santería, for example, formed part of the vernacular, and even as intellectuals were learning, disseminating, and celebrating Cuba's African influences, television could not endorse these aspects of the island's culture.

The state's enforcement of morality and decency also included parenting. By banning children from working on television, the Ministry of Communication was not just preventing a child from being exposed to immoral content but also becoming a parental figure. With the help of the state, now parents could learn how to raise a modern Cuban child who would know how to behave according to gender parameters and how to discern which elements of Cuba's culture should make him or her proud to be Cuban.

### Policing Decency on the Screens

In August 1956, the Cuban Legion of Decency published a bulletin addressing the "immorality plagues" that had battered the city of Havana.<sup>90</sup> Focusing on bordellos, *hospedajes* (lodgings where couples met for sex), and pornographic magazines, the Legion demanded that the government aggressively battle all activities that were damaging Cuba's "Christian morality and good customs," traits that were at "the core of all civilized societies."<sup>91</sup> Even as the legion's complaints came from a highly conservative Catholic doctrine, the criticism was not off the mark. In the 1950s, sex ruled Havana, offering local and foreign clients an array of "price ranges, comfort, and discretion."<sup>92</sup> Bordellos and sex locales, together with gambling, helped shape the characterization of Havana as a place where illegality was welcomed. But the Legion of Decency's focus on Havana's sex industry was not its only

concern at the time. Since 1955, the Legion had been strongly advocating that the Comisión Revisora de Películas (Movie Review Commission, a government-run office) take a closer look at Hollywood and European films screened in Cuba and their public display of immorality. In a CMO-TV *Mesa redonda* broadcast, the Legion demanded that the government institute a new law to monitor films.<sup>93</sup>

The Legion of Decency's call for a stricter look at the exhibition of immoral content (i.e., sex) in films related to the type of monitoring that had characterized the Comisión Revisora de Películas during Batista's regime. Since its establishment in 1944, the primary objective of the commission had been to verify that movie content was appropriate for children under the age of twelve. However, in the post-1952 period, the commission's censorship centered, for the most part, on films that endorsed rebellion, insurrection, and communism.<sup>94</sup> As mentioned in chapter 2, a year after Batista's coup, all cinema newsreels had to be approved by the Comisión Revisora de Películas before being shown in movie theaters. This surveillance practice did not mean, however, that the commission was able to detect the political messages in all films or, more important, anticipate how film critics would write about the texts. For example, as Megan J. Feeney's research demonstrates, a film such as *Viva Zapata*, whose main topic was the Mexican Revolution, passed the censors. And in terms of film criticism, it was common for reviewers to interject their political views against Batista and to criticize U.S. hegemony in their opinionated pieces.<sup>95</sup> Thus, in some ways, film reviewers, similar to some television critics, utilized various media outlets as channels for expressing their political commentary. Nonetheless, in a period when television was scrutinized for its so-called indecent content, some television reviewers, in an attempt to divert censorship away from local productions, echoed the Legion of Decency's call regarding film, thus distancing themselves from the film reviewers' highly critical views of Batista's censorship.<sup>96</sup>

Noticing the imbalance between the ongoing monitoring of local production and the lack of attention to Hollywood films aired on television, several television reviewers and producers suggested that the minister of communication change direction and focus on movies. Additionally, on its editorial page, the *Diario de la Marina* called for a closer look at films in movie theaters as well as those broadcast on television.<sup>97</sup> The government listened, at least partly. The mayor of Havana closed theaters that showed pornographic movies, and the minister of communication announced that

his office would create a commission to inspect radio and television, paying particular attention to the movies broadcast on television.<sup>98</sup> Even though the commission to inspect films was not instituted, the government showed great interest in controlling the screening of sex in the years to come.

Following the morality campaign initiated in the 1955–56 period, the Ministry of Communication continued to monitor signs of “immorality” throughout the end of Batista’s regime. Television shows depicting people dancing to rock and roll, telenovelas that insinuated improper sexual relations, dancers showing too much skin, comedians who made jokes that could be decoded as sexual, and movies that offended “public morality” were among the programs and people that the Ministry of Communication suspended.<sup>99</sup> Thus, even though by the end of the decade U.S. magazines were describing Havana as a *bordello* and Cuban journalists pondered the U.S. Mafia’s control of Havana’s casino industry, television had to be a puritanical space.<sup>100</sup> The regulation of sex and immorality operated in different coordinates and realities on television versus in Cuban society. But, as Ann Laura Stoler reminds us, “Sexual asymmetries and visions convey what is ‘really’ going on elsewhere, at another political epicenter. They are tropes to depict other centers of power.”<sup>101</sup> The surveillance of televised sex that heightened in the 1955–56 period went beyond regulations of the body and sexual desire. The government’s stern control of television coincided with the solidification of the anti-Batista movement.

Student protests and labor strikes flourished in Havana, and, in Gladys Marel García-Pérez’s words, “increased confrontations between the people’s sectors and the government in 1955–56 established the basis for civil war in Cuba.”<sup>102</sup> At the same time, as García-Pérez’s research indicates, the government began to repress people who were (or seemed to be) involved in an insurrection. These tactics of surveillance also applied to newspapers and magazines. Although the news censorship established in 1956 was not as severe as that which took place a year later, editors and journalists voiced their discontent.<sup>103</sup> Progressively, freedom of expression dwindled, and the partial reestablishment of the constitution that took place in 1955 halted. The imminent presence of a revolutionary movement and the alleged threats of a communist uprising (both student protesters and Fidel Castro were labeled as communists in 1956) were enough for the government to eliminate constitutional rights.<sup>104</sup>

In the 1955–56 period (and beyond), spectacles of decency mostly functioned as government-guided rhetorical and political actions to validate the control of the state in a moment of crisis. Through the regulation of televised racial, gender, and sexual performances, the state could claim not only concern for the moral well-being of its citizens but also assert its goal to promote a European-influenced cultural modernity. In that way, the government’s scrutiny of decency and the political crisis did not completely alter the narrativization of success that characterized the spectacle of progress. Whereas the Association of Cuban Advertisers did not conduct its May 1956 survey due to the tense political situation and the suspension of constitutional guarantees, television owners and reviewers continued to praise the developments of Cuban television as a sign of Cuban modernity.<sup>105</sup> In other words, even as the suspension of the survey revealed part of the artifice behind the spectacles of progress, owners and reviewers continued to assert Cuban television’s success.

In 1956, CMQ-TV, Televisión Nacional, and Telemundo expanded their signals to the eastern parts of the island. Although audiences complained about bad reception or not having access to television (recall the disgruntled *pinareño*), owners and reviewers celebrated the fact that Cuba had three networks.<sup>106</sup> In terms of television sets, Cubans owned 200,000 in 1956, positioning the island as the sixth country in the world—and number one in Latin America—in terms of ownership.<sup>107</sup> Renowned performers like Liberte, Roland Gerbeau, and Libertad Lamarque participated in local programming, and while these appearances mainly took place during the ratings season, reviewers covered their participation as examples of the excellence of Cuban television.<sup>108</sup>

To be sure, the crisis that began in 1954 continued to affect the industry. Popular shows lost their sponsors, others were canceled, and many media professionals migrated to other parts of Latin America.<sup>109</sup> However, without losing perspective on the crisis, television reviewers began to cover the successes of Cuban artists, media professionals, and television products off the island as examples of Cuban television’s progress. Thanks to the emergence of television in various places throughout the region, the lack of trained personnel in the countries that set up this complex system, and Cubans’ vast experience in multiple aspects of television production, the impact of Cuban television was felt outside the island. Stories about Cuban technical

staff helping develop television in other parts of Latin America, news about Latin American media entrepreneurs' admiration for Cuban television, the success of Cuban scripts in the region, and the investment of Cuban radio and television owners in various Latin American nation-states (specifically CMQ-TV's *Goar Mestre*) became part of the spectacles of progress.<sup>110</sup>

Nonetheless, one important aspect that began to change in the narratives that formed the spectacles of progress was the blind admiration for the United States. While Cuban cultural elements and people were key to reviewers' acceptance of programs that originated in the United States, open rejections of U.S. influences were sporadic and mostly came from television reviewers. This reception of Americanness began to change in 1956, and, interestingly, some of the questioning of U.S. influences came from audience members. This included incredulity regarding the fact that many Cuban programs were adaptations of U.S. shows, offense at learning that the upper classes preferred U.S. cigars to Cuban ones (which affected sponsorship), and distrust over claims about Cuban television's top position in the world when Hollywood movies began to dominate the schedule.<sup>111</sup> Similar to previous years, audience members' letters fragmented the discourse of progress that television owners and some reviewers embraced. The main difference between previous challenges and those initiated in 1956 was the audience's rejection of the United States' role in Cuban commercial television and the blind adoption of U.S. culture by certain sectors of the Cuban audience. These reactions can be seen as part of the changes taking place in Cuba's narrative of nationality. As Louis A. Pérez writes, "New narratives on nationality were taking form. The dominant cultural motif of the 1950s addressed matters of representation, a process that necessarily involved the affirmation of Cuban as distinct from and independent of things North American at a time of deepening economic dislocation and political crisis."<sup>112</sup> If the 1940s embodied both the promise of utopia and the threat of dystopia, by the late 1950s the utopian ideals of democracy and economic abundance that defined the 1940s had collapsed.

It is in this temporal moment that the spectacles of democracy excelled and that, concomitantly, a preamble to the spectacles of revolution appeared on the international scene. Thanks to a series of *New York Times* articles published in 1957 focusing on Fidel Castro, a May 19, 1957, CBS News Special Report covering Castro and his army in Cuba's Sierra Maestra, and Batista's legalization of media censorship in 1957, the spectacles of democracy moved

to center stage. Even though these were already part of the national arena, the existence of an organized militant group and the Cuban citizens' engagement with the revolutionary movement revealed the cozenage of Batista's government. At the same time, photographs and stories in the *New York Times* about Fidel Castro's activities in Sierra Maestra brought international attention to the political situation in Cuba. Staged for a foreign public, the U.S.-made preamble to the spectacles of revolution introduced new imagery of and narratives about Cuba, presenting some of the elements that would constitute the spectacles of revolution.