


Intergenerational Conflict in Contemporary Cuba: Rivalry within Las Congas Santiagueras

*Conflicto intergeneracional en la Cuba contemporánea: rivalidad
dentro de las Congas Santiagueras*

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1. Introduction

The current article reflects on the topic of intergenerational conflict between those Cubans who lived closer to the beginning of the Castro-led Revolution of 1959, and those who were born closer to the beginning of the 1990s, during the fall of the Soviet Union, now referred to as the Special Period in the Time of Peace. In the documentary *Lázaro and the Shark: Cuba under the Surface* (2022), Cuban exile director William Sabourin O'Reilly showcases this national conflict. Through the screen, O'Reilly highlights the beauty of the Afro-influence combined with the intimate and lively rivalry between Santiago's local Conga groups in a country riddled by harsh conditions to dive deeper into the ever-growing intergenerational conflict. Within this current conflict, Cuba's generations are separated into Fidelists and Oppositionalists; in opposition to the Pragmatist and the Disengaged generation (Krull and Kobayashi). With recent restrictive legislation for Cuban filmmakers, the director's ability to make a controversial documentary of this nature is only possible from outside of Cuba as an exile.

For most people, when thinking of Santiago de Cuba, the first thing that comes to mind is the *Carnaval Santiaguero*. The *Carnaval Santiaguero* is a rich, dynamic celebration hosted on the 26th of July and commemorates Fidel Castro's attack on the Moncada barracks on July 26th, 1953 (Milstein 225). The date of the carnival is important because of its historical and political significance. The origins of the celebrations similar to this carnival, according to Lani Milstein, come from "17th-century exhibitions by the various African cabildos (mutual aid/enslaved nation societies)" (225). Milstein also identifies the Afro-influence in the origins of the carnival on the eastern side of the island by focusing on the influx of people from Saint-Domingue following the Haitian Revolution of 1804. Rafael Brea López, citing the *Crónicas de Santiago de Cuba de Emilio Bacardí*, confirms that the *mamarrachos* can be linked back to the

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fifteenth century in Santiago de Cuba (108). What both academics point out in unison is the Afro-influence of the enslaved Africans, who would use this festivity both as a method of artistic freedom and as an escape from the devastating reality they faced: slavery. Today, the Afro-influence brings vibrant colors, design, and fashion while also providing significant cultural remembrance to the Cubans. Without the presence of the Afro-Cuban population, the festivity, as it is known today, would cease to exist.

In Santiago de Cuba, where over 1,000,000 residents include a significant Afro-Cuban population representation (constituting 74.4%), the presence and influence of black bodies are highlighted, which is illustrated in the documentary (Galbán and Vega). The carnival, as it is manifested currently in the twenty-first century and presented in the documentary, can be linked to the beginning of the twentieth century, with the advent of the Republic in 1902 (Brea López 118).

The carnival, as we know it, is a state-sponsored event, which is not only meant to act as a celebratory event for the people in Santiago but has also become a national phenomenon as well (Milstein 225). The Conga competitions and the carnival in Santiago are a vital part of the cultural identity and fabric of *Santiagueros* and also play an important role within the local morals involving socio-political implications. This relationship with the state becomes a prominent focal point that the film director William Sabourin O'Reilly wants to emphasize. Born in Havana, Cuba in 1972 and exiled in 2000, he has been living in New Orleans since. He was awarded Best Documentary Short at the New Orleans Film Festival in 2011 for his film "Chasing Dreams." Additionally, he wrote and directed "Color Code, Memories," a documentary about race relations in his native Cuba (*Krakow Film Festival*).

2. Methodology

Previous scholarly work regarding the Conga lines and the carnival in Santiago has often tended to focus on descriptive accounts of travelers and journalists, with a mixture of anthropological fieldwork (Bettelheim; De Santis & Ugarriza; Krull & Kobayashi; Garth) or musicologists' developments of each of the instrument's roles and histories (Milstein; Brea López). Within the plethora of material in the last decades on a vast variety of topics regarding the carnival in Santiago de Cuba, a gap is evident in relation to the topic of intergenerational-political conflict within the Conga competitions during the festivities.

In the article, film analysis will be used as a methodological lens, using cinema as the main vehicle to explore the complexities of intergenerational conflict during the decades following the twenty-first century in Santiago de Cuba. Through the visual storytelling and intimate documentation of local *Santiagueros*, O'Reilly captures the fervor and relevance of the carnival, offering insight into the impact on local *Santiagueros*, other Cubans in the island who come to spectate, and exiles. It is within the exploration of the cultural importance of the Santiago Conga competitions that intergenerational conflict rises and presents itself as a constant presence that requires further exploration. To discuss the intergenerational conflict present in Cuba, this article will use the authentic voices of three of the main characters from the documentary, each representing their respective generation.

My main thesis is that William O'Reilly's documentary focuses on attacking Cuba's policies, mainly to address the economic crisis and socio-political tension, as a recent Cuban exile in New Orleans. He does this by juxtaposing the two leaders of their respective conga groups. The younger leader, Lázaro, is the head creative

director of the *Los Hoyos* conga group and is in opposition to the older leader, *el Tiburón*, who is the head creative director of the *San Agustín* conga group. Both characters stand as symbolic representations of their respective generations. By exploring the interviews as a whole, the dialogue, the cultural context, and the visual and emotional impact of this documentary, I argue that the director doesn't provide a nuanced perspective in the documentary but rather aims more for an anti-establishment argument. The third character, which completes the missing generation, is the eldest character of the Cuban exile, Antonio, who resides in Miami and ventures to Santiago every year to record on his personal camera the congas.

Mannheim's sociology alludes to how, when tension and conflict are present between generations, political and social change emerges, which paves the way for new generations of groups to be established (Mannheim). Sociologists Turner and Edmunds follow Mannheim's work. In "Generations, Culture, and Society," they state that their "principal goal is to demonstrate the value of generations over class in understanding cultural, intellectual, and national change in the twentieth century" (Turner & Edmunds 21). Connecting these ideas to the documentary and the role of intergenerational conflict will provide a clear understanding of the tension present.

I argue that emphasizing the artistic, personality, values, and style differences within the Conga lines and between Lázaro and *el Tiburón* is representative of the major differences and growing tension between generations currently present in Cuba. The older generation, *Fidelistas*, fully believe in and have optimism for revolutionary ideology (Krull & Kobayashi 183). This group romantically dreams of the promises made during the successful Revolution of 1959. *El Tiburón*, someone who falls under this category, utilizes the Revolution and its tropes in favor of his work as a method to win the Conga competitions. In addition, he uses this approach as a means of overall social promotion and benefits, leading to being untouchable under the eyes of the state. The younger generation representative, Lázaro, who is more familiar with experiencing the Special Period and the economic struggles that occurred during this tragic period, shows a certain disdain and distant attitude towards the ideology of the Revolution. He is more critical of the Cuban reality and pushes for a more confrontational stance against the establishment, which leads to conflict. It is important when discussing the aspect of intergenerational conflict and the differences between the generations of *el Tiburón* and Lázaro, that "it would be erroneous to assume that all Cubans have experienced them in the same way" (Krull & Kobayashi 166).

3. Personifying the Distinctive Generations on Intergenerational Conflict

Lázaro is a struggling father of triplets who, in a society that lacks the most basic of needs such as food, medicine, and technology, uses the Conga competition as his escape from ordinary life. The music and the choreographed dances that he organizes are his resistance to a government, which he does not shy away from criticizing.



Image 1. Lázaro on top of his house, speaking about the struggle and distance he feels towards the communist ideology that he lives in.

Because of Lázaro's age, his early 30s, he lived and endured his teenage years during the Special Period in Cuba, one of the harshest periods in Cuba's history because of its lack of resources (Paz 104). The new generation must play with *la doble moral*², leading to a personal struggle to adhere to the ideology of sacrificing materialistic goods and capitalism to maintain freedom and sovereignty from the imperialist United States. This is a constant struggle for Lázaro throughout the documentary. William O'Reilly, a Cuban exile, purposely portrays Lázaro as his protagonist because he is a non-conforming character who criticizes instead of following the Revolutionary ideology of the Cuban establishment. This confrontational attitude of Lázaro leads to a physical confrontation between him and the *Santiago* police during *el Arrollo*³.



Image 2. Lázaro is rebellious and becomes agitated when he believes that local police have planted a spy in civilian clothing, which he argues is an attempt to sabotage his group's Conga event.

² Garth describes double moral as "a term Cubans use to describe the contradictions of these social conditions where people are expected to uphold the revolution and espouse socialist values publicly while undermining those same values as they do anything necessary to get by behind the scenes" (Garth 802).

³ *El Arrollo* is normally held on the 24th of June, where the Conga lines go out in the city encouraging the locals and visitors to join in dance to their prospective groups. It is described as a collective ceremony of strong emotions that is reflected in the expressive gestures and faces of the participants (Brea López).

In a scene involving a conflict with the local Santiago police, stands out for being a clear representation of the animosity and tension present between the non-conforming, younger Conga director and the establishment that does not approve of his attitude and questioning. In the documentary, Lázaro highlights the conflict with local police, stating, “Who’s that dickhead cop in plain clothes? He must identify himself! You think I don’t know my rights?” (22:04). This assertion is supported by his rebellious nature and anti-establishment sentiment. In contrast with this rebellious and anti-revolutionary stance, the poster boy of the Cuban government is Lázaro’s rival, *el Tiburón*. Throughout the film, Lázaro is open and direct in critiquing the current Cuban establishment. This animosity and distance from the government, led Lázaro, during one of his global trips to France with the group, to consider moving to Europe and escaping the conditions of Cuba. For many of the younger generations in Cuba, emigrating from Cuba to escape the conditions and certain restrictions has grown in popularity with the recent “migración de los volcanes” (Mastrogovanni). Emigration within Cuba is not something new, especially with popular periods of immigration in the 1960’s, and 1990s, and the largest of which was before COVID-19, in the mid to late 2000s (Wasem).

The documentary closes with scenes of Lázaro alongside his group *Los Hoyos* losing the conga competition. The responsibility of the whole festival float lies in the hands of Lázaro, who needs to create the moving float, scavenge for materials, choreograph the dances, orchestrate the music, style the clothing and decorations of the dancers, and much more. With all of this hard work and dedication gone into the festival resulting in a tragic loss, as the director purposefully implicates, further contributes to Lázaro’s controversially anti-establishment attitude and his reluctance to promote the Revolution in opposition to his rival, *el Tiburón*. His attitude and an immense feeling of disappointment allude to how this younger, more rebellious generation remains on the island and is forced to pander to the Revolution if they desire direct results.



Image 3. This image captures Lázaro moments after the judges declare the float of San Agustín as the victor in this year’s float competition.

To further emphasize the main topic of intergenerational conflict, Lázaro requires a villain, a rival who stands for the opposite rebellious values, and finds comfort and power believing in the establishment. O’Reilly presents within the first minutes of the documentary the very villain, *el Tiburón*. He’s introduced as someone

who believes that the highest and most important figure in his life is President Fidel Castro, because of all that he did for Cuba. In the documentary, *El Tiburón* confesses that “in the past, I was a delinquent, someone who did not abide by the rules and the laws” (17:36). But since then, he has dedicated his life to making a successful Conga group that represents his neighborhood, San Agustín. *El Tiburón* is a charismatic and eccentric character who has an unwavering rule over the entire Conga group. He is meticulous with what is presented on the float and takes very seriously and personally his rivalry with Lázaro.



Image 4. *El Tiburón* is quick to comment on how the incident that occurred between Los Hoyos and the police during their Conga line was all Lázaro’s fault.

When the time comes for the final preparations on the float, which will be competing for the important award of best float, *el Tiburón* confesses one of his tactics is to “mix messages of the Revolution with Carnival traditions, it is a strategy” (59: 03). *El Tiburón*, as opposed to Lázaro’s float, which is based on the Spaniard Francisco de Goya etchings “Los Caprichos,” wants to mix traditional elements of the carnival with pro-Revolutionary propaganda. Within his group, certain of the dancers hold the images of Fidel Castro. When the dancers ask why they needed to hold up images of Fidel and Raúl, *el Tiburón* states “because they are the ones who authorize the carnival” (59:21).



Image 5. The San Agustín float during the float competitions in Santiago, directed by *el Tiburón*.

The controversy surrounding the degree of government support is not something new, especially as seen in the case of *el Tiburón* and his favoritism with the local government. Judith Bettelheim mentions how, during her fieldwork in 1989, one of the newly formed groups *Textilera*, took a detour from their parade route to perform in front of the central office building of Eden Cigars. I mention this case in the 1980s to allude to how within the heat of rivalries and desire to become victorious, conga groups have not shied away from taking advantage of situations with the government for their favor. *El Tiburón* does this effectively, as opposed to Lázaro, who does not show any desire to succumb to favoring the establishment.

Krull and Kobayashi, in their article, separate Cuba's contemporary generations as Fidelists, and Oppositionalists; and Pragmatist and the Disengaged generation (2009). One of the key characteristics of the older generation is that they have a greater sense of collective vision and they feel a sense of responsibility for the government, regardless of the hardships endured. This categorization from Krull and Kobayashi is similar to the theoretical frameworks of Mannheim and Edmunds and Turner, where historical events and people's proximity to them from birth, create different personal philosophies and perspectives on life. From Krull's and Kobayashi's opposite groups in Cuba, O'Reilly's documentary is effective in personifying this separation with the characters Lázaro and *el Tiburón* by following their lives and personalities. As a result, the audience can witness, both visually and personally, these characteristic differences.

The discussion on intergenerational conflict becomes evident by analyzing Antonio Hung Vidal, who migrated to Miami in 1992 from Santiago de Cuba. Even though his age is never mentioned in the film, we can safely assume that he is over the age of seventy-five years old, making him a generation older than *el Tiburón*. When Antonio is first presented in the documentary, he addresses that the reason he left Cuba was because he "Wanted to live in a free country" (13:12). He is a clear example of a Cuban exile who is discontent with the political reality of Cuba. This is a common pattern for Cuban immigrants who live in Miami. It is important to have his voice from Miami because it doesn't abide by certain censorship or fears of repercussions with there is an open discussion about the Cuban government. Antonio is part of this group that gave up on the hope of the Revolution, and after enduring parts of the crisis, decided to move to the United States (Hoffmann 22). While happy with his decision, there is one part of Santiago that sticks in his mind, the Congas. Antonio holds a large private archive of footage from previous carnivals and often travels during the summers to witness and capture the festivities. The generation of which he represents is understanding of the younger generation and is against the limitations and obstacles of the Revolution but also still holds nostalgia for certain elements from their home country. Because of Antonio's financial and geographical situation, he decided to become a sponsor for *Los Hoyos* group by bringing, from the United States, clothes, decorations, and shoes, items not easily obtained in Cuba because of the embargo and the cost. Despite being from a generation closer to the Revolution than Lázaro's, Antonio feels a responsibility to help his native Santiago neighborhood. Here, intergenerational conflict disappears.



Image 6. Antonio's nostalgia for the Santiago de Cuba Conga.

4. Conclusion

For the final part of this project, it is necessary to understand and briefly explore the implications of having this highly critical documentary come from a Cuban exile, William Sabourin O'Reilly. It is not rare for filmmakers to migrate from Cuba and live in the United States or, more recently, the popular creative destination, Spain. Exiled Cuban filmmakers do not have to fear legal repercussions by shooting a negative portrayal of Cuba's conditions or its government. Presently, tensions are high for filmmakers in Cuba with the Decreto-Ley 373, a legislation implemented in 2019 and intended to control film production content, filmmakers are tired (Rojas). These filmmakers are tired of the lack of change, tired of the limited resources to make their films, and tired of feeling scared to make a film that expresses how they truly feel, good or bad. This is why a documentary of this capacity is only conceivable from the production standpoint of a Cuban exile in the United States. During one of O'Reilly's screenings at the University of Texas at Austin, he was asked whether he felt fear when shooting this film and if the government did any type of questioning. He answered that the whole film's production and intended goal were kept secret. In addition, O'Reilly stated that he always kept a certain level of ambiguity because of the fear of having footage forcibly deleted or confiscated by the government, and this was even shown in the film when Antonio was forced to erase footage of local police beating festival members during *el Arrollo*.

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