

“I’m Not Talking Havana, I’m Talking New York!”: Animating Transnational Realities in *Chico y Rita*

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to understand the ways in which transnational realities are depicted in the fictional story of the 2010 animated feature film *Chico y Rita*. Set in the late 1940s and early 1950s, this film follows the journeys of Cuban musicians Chico and Rita as their successful careers bring them around the world and, eventually, back to each other. This essay begins with an examination of intertextual American visuals, drawing parallels between the film's animation style to that of "Golden Age" Hanna-Barbera cartoons such as *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones*. Following this analysis is the exploration of the American musical and its influence on the film's cinematography and visual aesthetics, though specifically *West Side Story* and *Singin' in the Rain*. An investigation of the historical accuracy of the musical entertainment industry of the 1940s concludes this analysis, ultimately depicting the coalescence of American, Spanish, and Indigenous cultures that make up the Cuban identities depicted in the film.

In between moments of interfering static, “Deberíamos deber de conformarnos” are some of the first words audiences hear in the 2010 animated feature *Chico y Rita*, when Chico twists the dial of an old radio, eventually landing on a jazzy show titled “Yesterday’s Melodies.” From the film’s very first moments, the intertextual visuals and musical score set up this Shakespearean love story as more than just one of star-crossed lovers from Havana, but one of transnational Cuban culture and identity. Directed by Fernando Trueba, Javier Mariscal, and Tono Errando, this film follows two talented

performers from Cuba as they fall in and out of love all while chasing fame in the American Jazz scene of the 1940s. In analyzing the film’s animation style and historical allusions, *Chico y Rita* proves to be a nuanced and progressive depiction of transnational Cuban identity that draws attention to the neocolonial forces of capitalism and the hybridized nature of cultural identity within an increasingly globalized world.

Animating Intertextual American Visuals

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Recalling the Golden Age of American Animation

Chico y Rita as both an animated feature and a musical, proves itself to be culturally layered in the way it reclaims traditionally American media. From the moment the opening credits begin to roll, a very familiar aesthetic is established when a smooth mambo underscores minimalist animation, depicting a montage of tiny boats, clouds, and airplanes slowly making their way across an ocean. Various bright blue, amorphous shapes make up this abstract seascape, providing further movement to the film's introduction, as the shapes gently float across the screen (see Image 1 and 2). This sequence is reminiscent of an animation style unique to Hanna-Barbera, a famous American production company known for their popular television cartoons from the 1940s through the 1970s such as *Tom and Jerry*, *The Flintstones*, and *The Smurfs*. The opening credits to *Chico y Rita* seem to mirror the ending credits of *The Jetsons*, which feature still versions of the bright blue, amorphous backgrounds with snapshots of main characters in the foreground (see Image 3 and 4). Employing aesthetics similar to that of the Golden Age of American animation, which occurred between

1937 through 1967, is vital to the film as it is not only a way of grounding the story in the past, but also a way of culturally subverting expectations. Unlike the typical Hanna-Barbera cartoon sitcoms, this animated feature does not aim to entertain its audiences with situational humor centered around a White, middle class American families, rather it is a realistic depiction of life in Havana for two Afro-Latino musicians who are tempted and misguided by the American entertainment industry. Animation as a medium has a troubled history of depicting minorities due to the fact that Vaudevillian minstrelsy is embedded into the foundation of the artform. Nicholas Sammond (2011), elaborates on this when he explains:

The animated minstrel characters—Felix, Mickey, Bugs, and similar continuing characters that have come to define the form—were tricksters and interlopers at the boundary between the screen and the real, arising from a tradition of interplay with the animator and expressing a desire to escape the bounds of two dimensions. This relationship to the minstrel is more than a matter of homology: the white gloves, big smile, and wide eyes sat on an ostensibly racially ambiguous or unmarked body (usually that of an

animal) as vestigial markers of minstrelsy. Likewise, the animated minstrel's behaviors—its resistance to both the animator/Interlocutor who created it and to the physical strictures of animate space—underpinned both the fundamental gag structure of many an early animated short and the basic template of the trademarked continuing character.¹

Chico y Rita achieves something entirely new as the style maintains its uniqueness in the way it mimics watercolor and ink drawings all the while referencing the very Americanness of the medium. Unlike early cartoons, which were merely minstrel caricatures, the black bodies of the film are drawn with soft lines and realistic human proportions, granting them a bodily autonomy that Black characters are rarely given within animation. Though Chico and Rita are performers that eventually become commodified by the White, American, upper classes, the film allows them to be seen in intimate and non-exploitative ways. The use of nudity is a perfect example of this, as the film does not shy away from

showing the title characters sexually engaged. After making their way to Chico's apartment, the scene cuts to their entangled, naked bodies on the bed, with the camera slowly panning over them from head to toe, then drifting away to the floor. After a fade to black, Rita wakes up the next morning and, while entirely naked, very nonchalantly dances her way over to the piano and sits down next to Chico to help him compose. These moments are particularly striking as they allow Black bodies to be naked rather than nude, something John Berger distinguishes between when he says, "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself".² In this moment, both Chico and Rita are given the chance to be seen by viewers not as entertainers or exotic spectacles, but as two people sharing a moment of sincere physical and emotional intimacy.

West Side Story and the American Dream

Following the opening credits, the first shot of *Chico y Rita* features a panoramic view of Havana from

¹ Nicholas Sammond, "'Who Dat Say Who Dat?' Racial Masquerade, Humor, and the Rise of American Animation." In *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, (Berkeley: University of California

Press, 2011), 129-152.

² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972) 50.

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above as the underscoring cuts out (see Image 5). With a view of the tightly compacted buildings and boats docking along the island's shores, audiences are placed into the setting of the film just as the story begins. This sequence is reminiscent of Jerome Robbins' *West Side Story* (see Image 6), as it also begins with a panoramic shot of New York City at the end of the overture, bringing the cityscape to the forefront. This decision seems very deliberate simply due to the general similarities between the two films: both are musicals that explore Latinx identity through a retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Once again, there seems to be a deliberate reclamation of the filmic medium in order to tell a more culturally authentic story. *West Side Story*, has, and continues to be, one of America's most beloved yet problematic musicals. While its iconic music and choreography continue to be praised, the depictions of Latinx characters within the show are extremely stereotypical, receiving decades of negative criticism and

contempt from the Puerto Rican community.³

According to Warren Hoffman (2014), "the history of the American musical is the history of white identity in the United States"⁴ as most musicals in American history have been "written by white people, for white people, and [are] about white people. From its creators to its consumers, the musical firmly reflects a white outlook on American life."⁵ Given this analysis, what seems to be at the heart of the musical is the hope promised by rugged individualism and the attainment of the American Dream as it is so frequently employed within classic white narratives. Hoffman argues that "the history of the musical has come to resemble the plot of a Broadway show itself: a rags-to-riches story in which a highbrow European art form, combined with immigrant contributions, assimilates and becomes the all-American middlebrow musical comedy"⁶ *Chico y Rita* stays true to the traditional themes of Golden Age musicals by featuring two lovers with their own "American Dreams," while also

³ Seth Abramovitch, "Steven Spielberg Met With Puerto Ricans About 'West Side Story' Concerns," last modified January 15, 2019 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/steven-spielberg-met-puerto-rican-activists-west-side-story-concerns-1176285>

⁴ Warren Hoffman, *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 3.

⁵ Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 5.

⁶ Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 11.

providing a criticism of the very culture from which their dreams are born.

What comes between Chico and Rita from the start of the film is Chico's gigolo lifestyle, which he commits to in order to find a "Yankee girl." His desire to move to the United States and join "the top Cubans" in the American jazz scene, drives him to seek as many "Yankee" relationships as possible, and it is for this reason that Rita is special: her allure does not come from the fact that she is rich or White or American, rather, her allure comes from the raw talent and biting honesty she possess. When Rita is later approached by a talent agent, Chico's presumptuousness and jealousy, fueled by his desire for fame, are what set the couple on divergent paths. Most importantly though, neither are satisfied by their accomplishments, which forces the narrative to continue well past the moment they "make it" in the industry. Once Rita finds great success as a vocalist in New York City, a part of her cultural identity is taken away from her when she is given the stage name "Rita LaBelle" to make her Blackness more palatable to Western audiences. When Chico finds his success as a pianist and composer touring Europe, he continues to feel a crippling loneliness and aching for

Rita. With each unfortunate turn in the plot, American values and ideals such as money, fame, and Whiteness, seem to be at the center of the couple's problems. The more they achieve the lonelier and more unsatisfied they find themselves, though this morality tale proves to be atypical as it does not end in tragedy.

Unlike *West Side Story*, Chico and Rita are reunited in the end because they are able to grow and change as characters. When Chico is finally able to return to the United States after decades of living in post-revolutionary Cuba, he finds even greater success in the music industry, though he is no longer chasing fame; instead, finding Rita has become his new dream. After decades of solitude, Chico comes to realize that his "American Dream" clouded his ability to understand his true desire for Rita.

Adapting Abstraction from Singin' in the Rain

One of the most striking moments of the film is an abstract sequence Chico dreams up while traveling to New York City. The dream begins with violins in tremolo while a line drawing of New York City is set against a black background, with neon colors flashing behind it, followed by a series of flashing Times Square signs pointing to different

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clubs and theaters (see Image 7). Chico walks into the frame animated in a similar style, encountering men in sailor outfits who escort him to a door through which he falls. He then sees Rita descend from a staircase in a tight-fitting dress and attempts to kiss her. Before their lips touch, a man grabs Rita and begins dancing with her, passing her around to dance with and kiss various other men until she spins out of control and transforms into Josephine Baker. As she begins an African-styled dance in a banana-skirt, a man with a trumpet blows his horn into Chico's face, launching him into a piano where he begins to play the song "As Time Goes By" from *Casablanca*. Rita approaches the piano in a trench coat and large hat, giving Chico romantic looks until Humphrey Bogart grabs her and kisses her. Chico stops playing by abruptly banging on the piano, to which Humphrey Bogart responds "Keep playing Sam." Chico angrily replies "Me llamo Chico," before Humphrey Bogart turns to him with a gun and says "Te llamas," shooting him in the chest.

This sequence indicates a major shift in the film both aesthetically and

thematically as the rest of the story takes place in the United States. Drawn in the style of Al Herschfeld, one of the most famous American comics of the 1920s and 30s, the dreamscape is designed to highlight the cultural conforming both characters must undergo in order to find success in the states, though more specifically, Rita. The way she is passed around to different American men and then transformed into various exoticized and sexualized pop culture icons, reinforces her status as a commodified object of entertainment. This foreshadows Rita's public denouncement of the American entertainment industry and its racism while performing in Vegas, ending her career in show business altogether. This scene also serves as a direct allusion to the abstract dance sequence in *Singin' in the Rain* which begins with similar Times Square imagery (see Image 8). Chico's journey through undefined, abstracted spaces mimics Fred Astaire's vision for a scene called "Broadway Melody," which tells "the story of a young Hooper who comes to New York."⁷ Unlike Fred Astaire's daydream, which tell the story of a young dancer who eventually finds

⁷ *Singin' In the Rain*, directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen (1952; Burbank, CA: HBO Max, 2020).

success and accolades on Broadway, Chico's nightmare is formatted in a similar style, emphasizing his inability to "play along" with the roles American culture expects him to fulfill: a bystander, an admirer, a side character. The roles Chico and Rita are cast in are decided upon by the white men who surround them, and it is Chico's outright refusal to succumb to these white men that ultimately leads to his demise both in his dream and later in his life.

A History of Music, A History of Culture

The story of Chico and Rita is, in large part, the story of Afro-Cuban jazz and its transnationality. The genre began in 1939 with a composition titled "Tanga," by Mario Bauzá, considered to be the "first" piece of Afro-Cuban jazz due to the incorporation of instruments typical of Afro-Latin music such as the claves, tingales, bongos, and congas.⁸ With the many talented musicians traveling from Cuba to New York and Chicago

throughout the 1930s and 40s, many Cuban musicians created names for themselves within the American jazz community, such as Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo, who's tragic and untimely death is incorporated into the plot of *Chico y Rita*. In fact, Chico, Rita, and Ramón's interaction with the music industry of the 1940s is rooted in realism as evidenced by the attention to detail in the film's plot and settings. The club in which Chico performs Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto*, El Tropicana,⁹ refers to a very famous nightclub in Villa Mina that was a popular tourist destination and the radio competition Chico enters with Rita, "Concurso Cadena Azul," references a popular Cuban radio station that operated between 1939 and 1954 called Radio Habana Cuba-Cadena Azul.¹⁰ Additionally, Rita's character design seems inspired by famous singer and actress Rita Montaner, while Chico's character is largely based on famous pianist, composer, and bandleader Bebo Valdes¹¹ who also composed all

⁸ "Chucho Valdes, Jazz Bata, and the Evolution of Afro-Cuban Jazz" Stanford online, October 19, 2019, <https://live.stanford.edu/blog/october-2019/chucho-vald%C3%A9s-jazz-bat%C3%A1-and-evolution-afro-cuban-jazz>.

⁹ Rosa Lowinger and Ofelia Fox, *Tropicana Nights: The Life and Times of The Legendary Cuban Nightclub* by Rosa (Harcourt Books,

2005).

¹⁰ "RHC Cadena Azul," Libre, accessed August 16, 2020, http://www.libreonline.com/home/index.php?view=video&id=168%3Arhc-cadena-azul-1950&option=com_jomtube

¹¹ Bob Mondello, "'Chico and Rita' and All That Jazz," last modified February 9, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/02/09/146468045/c>

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the music in the film. These historical references not only allow a retelling of a fascinating transnational musical history, but also redefines what it means to be Cuban.

Nationalism, as defined by Benedict Anderson, is an "imagined political community" based on the fact "that any social grouping so large that its members have no direct contact with one another requires a degree of imagination to conceive a sense of community."¹² James Ferguson builds upon this idea of "imagined community" when he argues that "music, in its range of expression and reception, forms part of the imagined landscape that influences both national identity and its perception overseas."¹³ The heart and soul of *Chico y Rita* is its music, as it reflects the nuanced complexities of cultural imperialism and transnational identity all the while providing a sense of cultural unity among the Cuban characters in the film. While Chico is deported back to Cuba and unable to return due to the effects of the Cuban Revolution, Rita stays in the United

States, waiting for Chico to find her, each representing the fragmentation of Cuba's population after the revolution. In the fifteen years following Fidel's rise to power, an estimated 500,000 Cubans immigrated to the United States in opposition of Castro's communist political structure.¹⁴ Afro-Cuban jazz provides a united cultural identity for Cubans regardless of their current nationality as the genre is, itself, transnational, and is ultimately what brings Chico and Rita together again at the end of the film.

The Future of Cuban Perspectives

Chico y Rita's ability to tell a history of Cuban culture through animation, song, and dance, proves to be brilliantly inventive and offers exciting possibilities for the future of Cuban storytelling. Most impressive was the film's blunt commentary on U.S. cultural imperialism, highlighting the impact of American capitalism and its interference with Latin America through a postcolonial narrative. Despite the film's nuanced

hico-and-rita-and-all-that-jazz.

¹² T.M. Scruggs, "'Let's Enjoy as Nicaraguans': The Use of Music in the Construction of a Nicaraguan National Consciousness." *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 2 (1999): 297.

¹³ R. James Ferguson. "The Transnational Politics of Cuban Music and Cuban Culture,"

The Culture Mandala 6, no. 1: 2003.

¹⁴ "The Miami Mirror: Cubans on the Other Side of the Water are Slowly Changing Too." *The Economist Online*. March 21, 2012. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2012/03/24/the-miami-mirror>.

understanding of the politics of transnationalism, it is given yet another layer of complexity as it is told from a European perspective. Released in association with RTVE, the national radio and television broadcasting company in Spain, and with an entirely Spanish directorial team, the film does not resist the stereotypical depiction of Cuba as a prison. When Chico is deported, his passport is withheld from him at Cuban customs and he is no longer allowed to leave the country. Afterwards, he is notified that playing jazz music has been outlawed because of its imperialist status under the new government, forcing him out of a job. While these are just a few examples of the human rights violations Cuba has been known for since the revolution, it's worth considering whether or not this type of depiction is valid or ethical.

A 2014 study conducted by Manuel Gonzalez Ayestaran analyzes four separate RTVE documentaries about Cuba, all released between 2003 and 2011, concludes that these films depicted Cuba as either poor, sad, and lost without its colonizers or full of ignorant, happy people who

live to serve the tourists visiting their paradise. He argues that both of these depictions suggest a "Cuba prison," which comes about when "a civil society demanding free market policies is represented, and, in turn, prey to the will of a state oligarchy incapable of leading the country towards economic development."¹⁵ Western countries lean into the depiction of the "Cuba prison" because it refuses to challenge their own socio-economic system in place. *Chico y Rita's* focus on the romanticism of pre-revolutionary Cuba is problematic as it was clearly run by American capitalism. The reality brought on by the very system under criticism is what Chico is most nostalgic about, which begs the question, is this film really interested in depicting cultural imperialism or the loss of a Cuban culture at the hands of communism? Possibly both, though it is abundantly clear that the future of storytelling for Cuba is to be in control of its own narrative, one that is written and told by its people. *Chico y Rita* holds promise for a more inclusive future in media, though there is certainly still a long way to go before our understanding of Cuban history is truly holistic.

¹⁵ Manuel Gonzalez Ayestaran, "Approach to the study of the media war against Cuba: representation of Cuba in 4 TVE

documentaries," *History and Social Communication* 19, (2014): 299-319.

APPENDIX



Figure 1: Trueba, Fernando, Javier Mariscal, and Tono Errando, dir. Chico y Rita. 2011; London, England: Amazon Video, 2020.



Figure 2: Trueba, Fernando, Javier Mariscal, and Tono Errando, dir. Chico y Rita. 2011; London, England: Amazon Video, 2020.



Figure 3: Warner Archive, "The Jetsons (End Credits)" YouTube video, 00:40. March 18, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qURn3BkoIXQ>

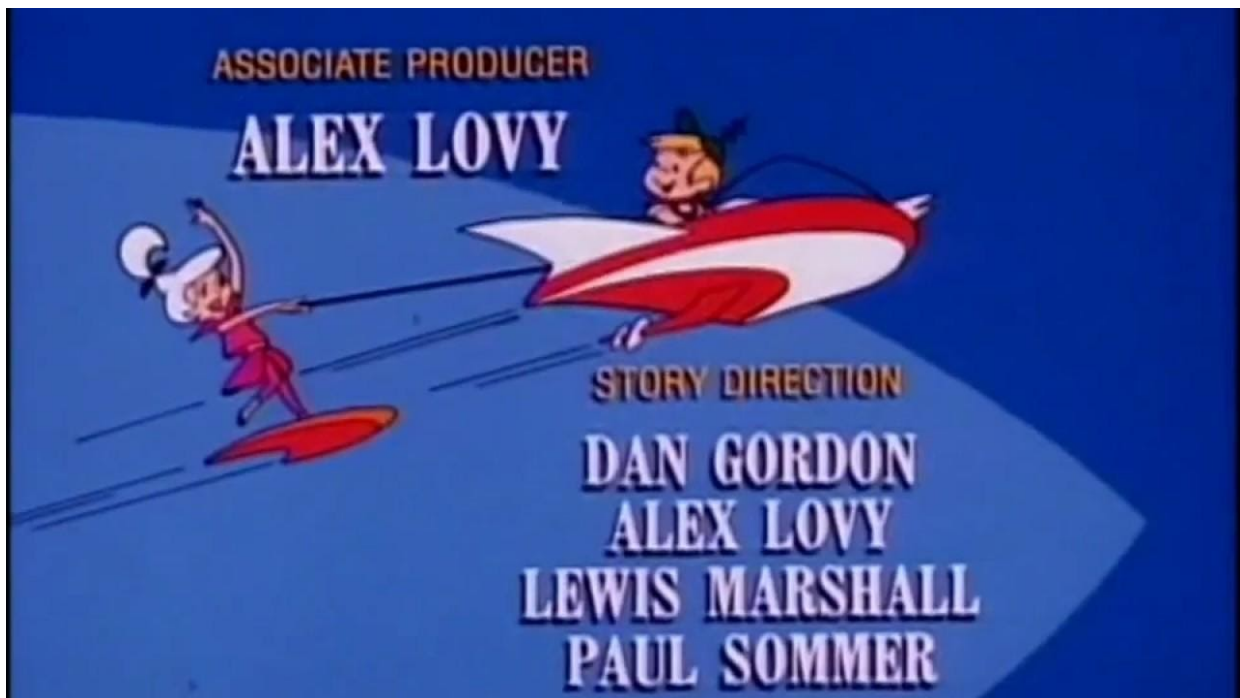


Figure 4: Fail Bob 2000, "The Jetsons Credits (Syndicated Season 1 version, HQ)" Youtube video, 00:40. September 12, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Evmmd1D8vc0>

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Figure 5: Trueba, Fernando, Javier Mariscal, and Tono Errando dir. *Chico y Rita*. 2011; London, England: Amazon Video, 2020.



Figure 6: Robbins, Jerome dir. *West Side Story*. 1961; Santa Monica: MGM/UA Home Entertainment.

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BIO

Isabella Pilares is a middle school ELA teacher by day and a second-year Screen Studies student at Feirstein by night. As a Latina scholar, her studies in film school primarily focus on the representation of minorities within children's animation. With a Masters of Arts in Teaching degree, her perspective as an educator allows her to approach each topic she addresses with a unique take on how the medium, message, and distribution of media affect children and students. Her goal as an educator and a film scholar is to emphasize the importance of media literacy and equitable technological practices among all students despite their ethnic or socio-economic background.