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Where is Sara Gomez? (¿Dónde está Sara Gomez?)

Dir: Alessandra Muller, Cuba, 2005

A Review by Kwame Dixon, Syracuse University, USA

A powerful social and cultural renaissance is flowering in the Americas – Afro-Latin America is on the map. The cultural, historical and sociological relevance of Afro-Latin peoples and their histories is now the subject of vigorous examination. Across Latin America and the Caribbean, the black contribution to art, literature, film and cinema, as debated within an Afro-Latin context, is re-configuring the national identities of many Latin American and Caribbean societies. This cultural renaissance is organically linked to strong, positive, black-based social movements. A new set of cultural politics has unfolded across the black Americas. By cultural politics, I refer to a process enacted when sets of social actors shaped by, and embodying different cultural meanings and practices come into direct conflict with one another. Blacks in Latin America are renegotiating and redefining the cultural terrain as they attempt to reclaim their national histories.

The social erasure of black poets, filmmakers, actors, actresses and other artists in the cultural sphere was until recently such that Afro-Latin cultural productions were widely not recognized by the Latin American cultural and social institutions. Black cultural productions were seen as marginal, primitive and existing beneath cultural standards of Latin American societies. In fact, cultural productions and works that configure or address the image of Afro-Latin peoples within narrative texts or subtexts (literature and film) are often marginal, if not invisible, within the broad frame of the Latin American cultural lens. However, I would suggest that black social and cultural movements are now implementing new forms of cultural politics, and in doing so, are challenging old cultural notions while simultaneously calling for a new kind of progressive multicultural renaissance.

Black directors, actors and themes are more present than ever. Across the continent there are new artistic forms and cultural productions that portray the history, the struggles, and the lives of black Latin Americans from a fresh angle. Such recent films and documentaries include: *Good-Bye Momo / A Dios Momo* (2005), a beautiful tale focused on the exploits of an Afro-Uruguayan kid (dir. Leonardo Ricagni); *African Blood* (2004), a documentary on the black presence in Mexico (dir. Roberto Olivares); *Del Palenque de San Basilio* (2003), explores the largely forgotten Afro-Colombian community of Palenque de San Basilio, (dir. Edwin Goggel); *Afro-Argentines* (2002) refocuses attention on black Argentina (dir. Diego Caballos and Jorge Fortes);

and *Roots of my Heart* (2001) deals with the 1912 massacre of over six-thousand members of Independents of Color (dir. Gloria Rolando). These are only a handful of some of the new films and documentary on the black Americas. Whereas blacks have long been structurally absent in Latin American cinema, or negatively portrayed, these new films on black Latin-America finally bring presence to absence.

Where is Sara Gomez? (2005) is an example of the newly emerging cultural landscape. This short but effective documentary focuses on the brief life of Sara Gomez, an Afro-Cuban, and Cuba's first female director. The title of the documentary could have easily been "Who is Sara Gomez?" given that only a few Cubans and hard core film buffs have ever heard of her. Sara Gomez was born in Cuba in 1943 into a middle class family. She studied literature, piano and Afro-Cuban ethnography before becoming a film maker. As a pioneering women and intellectual, she was a revolutionary film maker who focused on Afro-Cuban cultural and gender issues. The director relying heavily on interviews from Gomez's husband and children, as well as people, who worked with her, brings together scattered fragments of her life. Family and friends tell compassionate stories about Gomez the mother, wife, and director.

Shot in colour, with footage from Gomez's black and white films interspersed, the documentary flows naturally as the camera roves through the barrios of Havana. The director uses rare archival footage from two of Gomez's films to give the viewer a sense of her aesthetic depth and vision. The footage shot by Gomez in black and white has a soft grainy texture; the shots are well framed, the angles and lighting perfect: Gomez captures her human subject as beings fully cognizant of their difficult circumstances. Her subjects appear real and authentic – never dramatic; marginal but never marginalized.

We learn that Sara Gomez entered the Cuban Film Institute at an early age where she worked with the well known Cuban director, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. Between 1962 and 1974, Gomez directed twelve documentaries and one critically acclaimed feature film. Gomez's best known work is *Cierta Manera / One Way or Another* (1974), in which she focuses on the life of the dispossessed, the marginal and the damned of Cuban of society as well as the social lives of blacks and other forgotten people in Cuba. Her camera captures the ways in which centuries of profound exploitation have affected the social conditions of everyday people. Her images are never harsh or uncomfortable – only disturbing. She speaks through the camera as her lens is able to frame the accumulated affects of slavery and colonial relations. Through Gomez's eyes, via the camera, we are engaging in soft voyeurism - anthropology with respect. In doing so, she creates a new landscapes and social images built on the simple idea of realism, i.e. that the lives of common people have intrinsic value.

For many, *Where is Sara Gomez?* will provide a valuable introduction to her works. In Gomez's first documentary, *I'll go to Santiago / Iré a Santiago* (1963), the camera pans from colonial monuments into urban spaces intimately inhabited by a local Afro-Cuban population. By emphasizing Santiago, as well as its economic, political and architectural legacy, Gomez makes a claim for Santiago as a vibrant point of origin where all Cubans (particularly Afro-Cuban) can reclaim their national heritage. *We've got Rhythm / Y Tenemos Sabor* (1967) is a compelling examination of Afro-Cuban instruments and musical forms: Gomez situates herself as a black woman participant-observer as she records Afro-Cuban cultural formations. Her physical

presence as narrator helps convey a tone of informality, which elicit a casual, response on part of the film subjects (Benamou, 1994: 57).

Her critically acclaimed *One Way or Another / De Ceirta Manera* (1974) is a feature length film, the first to be directed by a women in Cuba. It examines the implications of being black and female in a developing country. The story focuses on the love affair between a 'mulatto' factory worker Mario, a 'dark-skinned' man from the urban ghetto, and Yolanda, a middle class 'mulata' woman. Mario being black and from the slums is seen as a 'marginal' subject and part of Cuba's underclass (Galiano, 1977: 4). Gomez posits 'marginality' as a part of the colonial master-slave relationship, while simultaneously showing how pre-revolutionary forms of behavior, expectations, and oppression can co-exist with institutional opportunities for social transformation (Benamou, 1994: 58).

Gomez locates the ideological roots of machismo in Cuban colonial and patriarchal past. She does not focalize gender at the expense of race and cultural identity, but instead demonstrate their historical interconnections (Benamou, 1994: 58). Her work thus problematizes the complex drama of race, class, gender and colonial relations as the contradictions a new society like Cuba had to address. Embedded within Cuba's long colonial past were a series of sharply defined class and cultural prejudices where blacks were pushed to lowest level of a racialized hierarchical system, as well as being socially cleansed from Cuba's national identity. As a filmmaker and story-teller, Gomez is able to construct an airtight narrative and plot as she skillfully confronts Cubans patriarchal and racialized history.

Gomez's artistic methodology – captured by *Where is Sara Gomez?* - is best appreciated within the context of Cuban society attempt to struggle with and resolve razor sharp contradictions. The Cuban revolution of 1959 emerged, on the one hand, as a specific response to social injustice and economic inequality perpetuated over centuries, and as a complete reaffirmation of Cuban national history, on the other. In the aftermath of 1959, Cuba would build a new society to counter the effects of centuries of inequality as well as produce a new class of artists and intellectuals in order to reconstruct a new Cuban national identity. This new identity would be forged based on the old fragments of its horrific colonial experience and new ideas of the revolution. Gomez's work is representative of these new artists, and as a revolutionary film maker, she would capture the hangover of the past: slavery, colonialism – and the promise of the future – a new Cuban reality in her documentaries and films.

Where is Sara Gomez? is an extremely important documentary because it not only brings the story of Sara Gomez back to life, but we are reminded that film makers have crucial roles as organic intellectuals and story tellers in all societies. The documentary functions on several levels: first, it pays homage to and reconstructs the life of a pioneering young woman whose life ended way too early; second, as a documentary and story, it makes a small but important contribution to reconstructing Cuban national history, particularly Afro-Cuban history; third, given the absence of presence of blacks in Latin American film – particularly directors – this documentary helps to establish the presence of blacks – particularly women – by expanding the lens of Latin American cinematography. Given the relatively lack of films on black issues from Latin America, this documentary makes a significant contribution to the cinema and film studies. Sara Gomez died of severe asthma attack on June 2nd 1974.

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