

CONGA SANTIAGUERA: A CENTURY OF INNOVATION AND COMPETITION  
by

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A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,  
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APPROVAL

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in  
Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement  
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ABSTRACT

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Santiago de Cuba is home to the island's biggest, oldest, and most famous carnival. Any local resident will confirm that "*sin conga no hay carnaval* (without conga there is no carnival)." In Santiago, conga refers to a vibrant street procession, the music that drives it, and the ensemble that makes the music. *Conga Santiaguera: A Century of Innovation and Competition* presents a musical history of the conga from roughly 1910 to 2010. This project, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/conga> employs an eBook, musical analysis, oral histories, and audiovisual media to show how the conga has been constantly reinvigorated by innovation, competition, and Afro-Diasporic rhythm. The eBook identifies important musical milestones and highlights the enduring connections between competitive conga ensembles and their neighborhoods. Musical analysis situates the conga within the broad context of Afro-Diasporic rhythm and identifies its connections to other Black Atlantic traditions. Video content celebrates Santiago's tradition bearers by showcasing their creativity and their memories of venerated players who preceded them.

*Conga Santiaguera: A Century of Innovation and Competition* is aimed at a broad audience of musicians, music fans, and scholars.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was made possible by the kind support and collaboration of Santiago's conga ensembles and their musicians. First, I offer my heartfelt gratitude to three elders who shared their wisdom: Mililián Galis Riverí, Walfrido Valerino Giro, and Bertha Armiñan Linares. Walfrido's daughter Yumila Valerino Salazar has also been very supportive.

From La Conga de Los Hoyos, I thank Lázaro Bandera Malet and Félix Bandera Bles for constantly supporting this project and warmly welcoming me to the conga's home: its *foco cultural*. Luis Beltrán Carvajal, Rubestier Porte Carrión, and Lázaro Merino Sánchez Beltrán have been consistently supportive and become my lifelong friends. From Conga San Agustín, I am deeply grateful for the support and friendship of Raúl López Martínez, Magali López and Carlos Guerra Pimentel. From Conga Paso Franco, I offer sincere thanks for the support and friendship of Rubildo Hylton Hardy, Richard Ferrera González, and Andrés Cobas Martíns.

Joaquín Solorzano Benítez, Roinel Danger Heredia and Vladimir Ibarra Paisán provided invaluable insight and patience as they helped me try to demystify the corneta china.

The late Daniel Chatelain (1949–2025) of Ritmacuba.com was a tireless advocate for Santiago's Black traditions and culture bearers. His permission to reuse photos and videos from his extensive collection is deeply appreciated. The surviving families of two of Santiago's greatest musicians, Neno Betancourt and Enrique Bonne, generously allowed access to their photo collections. Lani Milstein was extremely generous with her time and wisdom. Her outstanding work was one of the main inspirations for this project.

My research in Cuba was partially funded by a MALS Travel Grant.

Portions of the project eBook are based on material published in my article in the October 2021 issue of *Percussive Notes*, "La Conga Santiaguera—A Quick Trip to Cuba's 'East Side.'"

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## DIGITAL MANIFEST

### **I. Capstone Project Whitepaper**

### **II. WARC file**

1. Capstone Project website

Archived version of <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/conga>

## A NOTE ON TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

*Conga Santiaguera: A Century of Innovation and Competition* is a website hosted on the Manifold platform. This site includes an eBook, images, sound files, and embedded YouTube videos.

Audio and video editing were done with Audacity, iMovie and CapCut in 2025 and 2026. Map Images were created using Google Maps and Google Earth Studio. Musical examples were created with MuseScore.

## Introduction

For over a century, the quintessential sound of Santiago de Cuba’s carnival has been the conga. While Cuba is home to several local musical styles called “conga,” the *conga santiaguera* (Santiago-style conga) is a uniquely strong tradition, with thousands of revelers joining its sprawling musical processions. The conga is unique for its enduring resonance as a symbol of Santiago and its Black community.

My capstone project explores the history of the conga genre from roughly 1910 through 2010. I argue that this tradition has thrived for over a century because of constant innovation and competition between musicians and conga ensembles.

The project’s main goals are:

- to honor the virtuosic and dedicated musicians who have creatively defined and enlivened the music;
- to explore ways that conga ensembles have asserted their sonic and institutional identities as they compete for prestige;
- to consider connections between conga and other Afro-Diasporic music; and
- to encourage further research on conga and other styles of Afro-Cuban music in Santiago.

I chose to present my research as a Manifold website to reach a broad audience outside of academia. The site is designed to give viewers the flexibility to read text, view videos and photos, and listen to music.

The project’s core is a multimedia eBook. “Part 1: Building the Groove” (chapters 1–3) provides an overview of the African presence in Santiago and shows how the city’s

Black communities creatively defined and refined the conga between 1910 and 1939. “Part 2: Nurturing the Tradition” (chapters 4–7) explores the genre’s rhythmic and melodic layers, honors its protagonists, and shows how three conga ensembles assert their sonic and institutional identities as they compete for prestige. I discuss the project’s video content under “Methodology.”

## The Long Haul: A Thirty-Year Journey

My conga journey has been over thirty years in the making. While studying Afro-Cuban percussion in the early 1990s, I noticed that conga santiaguera was absent from vast “canon” of Afro-Cuban rhythms that drummers around the world studied. Commercial recordings and instructional materials on Cuban music focused on the Western part of the island. In this pre-YouTube era, the only way to learn about the conga was to travel to Santiago.

On my first trip to Santiago in 2000, I took percussion lessons with Félix Navarro, a member of Ballet Folklórico Cutumba, one of Santiago’s leading music and dance ensembles. I learned about conga and other Afro-Cuban percussion styles from *Oriente* (Eastern Cuba) and noticed some intriguing similarities between conga, Haitian *rara* (known as *gagá* in Cuba) and the Afro-Brazilian *Congo* rhythm. I assumed that the resemblance to *rara* had something to do with the history of Haitian migration to the region, a factor that is often mentioned when distinguishing between the Afro-Cuban cultures of *Oriente* and *Occidente* (Western Cuba). The similarity to the Brazilian “Congo” style was not surprising due to the long history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade between the Congo region, Cuba and Brazil.

Armed with a basic knowledge of conga, I went back to New York and studied the transcriptions and cassette recordings of my lessons. Between 2001 and 2006, I began my modest efforts to incorporate conga into the canon of “Latin rhythms” by teaching a basic

version to my percussion students. Around 2007, I began to incorporate conga santiaguera into two of the bands I led: Quimbombó, and its spin-off *bloco* or *comparsa* (street band) Bloco Quimbombó. I co-composed and arranged a conga-fusion piece, “Conga Eléctrica,” the title track of a 2008 Quimbombó album. Throughout the 2010s, I continued to study the few available commercial recordings of conga and repeatedly read Millet, Brea and Ruiz’ *Barrio, comparsa y carnaval Santiaguero* (Santiago: Neighborhood, Comparsa and Carnival), a groundbreaking ethnographic study of Santiago’s most famous conga ensemble, La Conga de Los Hoyos. My conga journey was largely on hold. Then came Micaela.

Around 2017 I heard the strident call of the *corneta china* (the shrill horn which is essential for a true conga procession) in an unlikely setting: a glitzy “Pan-Latin” restaurant where I was performing weekly. This venue featured mostly salsa, merengue, reggaeton and other “mainstream Latin” genres, so I was really surprised to hear the corneta, an instrument that is extremely irritating to most people outside of Santiago. But this song was quite accessible; it was the well-produced “conga-fusion” hit “Añoranza por la conga (Longing for the Conga),” informally known as “La Conga de Micaela (Micaela’s Conga)”. I did some googling and found out that this song’s protagonist, Micaela, was a Santiaguera living abroad suffering from a chronic case of “conga withdrawal;” her affliction, like the conga itself, was highly contagious. I dove headfirst into a conga “rabbit-hole” and found several inspiring new resources, including a YouTube instructional video featuring La Conga de Los Hoyos, Lani Milstein’s articles in *ReVista* and *Latin American Music Review*, and master drummer Mililian Galis Riverí’s groundbreaking work *La percusión en los ritmos afrocubanos y haitiano-cubanos* [Percussion in Afro-Cuban and Haitian-Cuban Rhythms]. I reached out to Lani, and she kindly shared her

Ethnomusicology Master's Thesis and recommendations about conga and Santiago. The conga was calling me.

Thoroughly inspired by this new material, I went back to Santiago twice in 2019 and took lessons with Los Hoyos' musical director Lázaro Bandera Malet, Galis, the revered singer Bertha Armiñan Linares, and several others. I befriended a lot of musicians and learned a great deal about the intricacies of conga performance and the subtle stylistic distinctions between Santiago's conga ensembles. That year, with my teachers' consent, I started posting transcriptions and musical analyses on my blog (Herman "Dale Tres Golpes"). I revived Bloco Quimbombó, rechristening it "Bloco La Conga" in recognition of the group's renewed "mission" to bring conga santiaguera to a wider audience. I shared my love for conga with a small group of students who joined the group in the annual Village Halloween Parade in New York's Greenwich Village.

During the 2020 COVID lockdown, I continued to spread the word by hosting and promoting remote classes with Lázaro. That fall, my article on conga was accepted for the 2021 publication of *Percussive Notes* (Herman "La Conga Santiaguera"). After spending a few months reading everything I could find on Afro-Cuban culture in Oriente, I enrolled in remote classes in Latin American Studies at Florida International University (FIU) in January 2021. At FIU, I learned a great deal about the construction of race, nation, and identity in The Americas and wrote a research paper on the nineteenth-century "Cocoyé" comparsa and genre. This essay was the basis for my discussion of Cocoyé in chapter one of the project eBook. That fall, I decided to pursue my love for conga in an academic setting. On the advice of CUNY professor Dr. Benjamin Lapidus, a long-time friend and musical colleague, I applied to the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) program.

## MALS Coursework: Representing the Past

When I entered CUNY, I was sure I wanted to study the conga santiaguera but unsure about the focus of my research. During my four years in the MALS program, I took courses in the History, Liberal Studies, Ethnomusicology, and Music Theory Departments. The readings and research projects for these classes allowed me to explore a variety of different approaches to understanding Cuba, Santiago, the conga, and its protagonists.

In the “Seminar in Interdisciplinary Studies: Museum Cultures,” we explored ways that museums and exhibits reflect the perspectives and political agendas of those who select, organize and describe their contents (Baxandall 34, Conn 503–504, Herbert and McCollum 97). These models inspired my seminar paper “*Foco Cultural: Community Memory on Display.*” This essay explored the ways in which the La Conga Los Hoyos’ *foco cultural* (rehearsal hall or community center) reinforces the conga’s reputation as a rebellious and patriotic local institution. Various elements of the foco work together to achieve this: its name, location, functions, contents, and stakeholders. Many of the ideas in this essay are reflected in my discussion of Los Hoyos’ institutional identity in chapter 7 of the eBook.

To frame the analysis for my “*Foco Cultural*” essay, I drew on the insights of historians to show how the items on display reflect a distinctly Cuban view of history. According to Nicola Miller, “history is a salient part of day-to-day life and Cubans’ sense of their identity” (161). Historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr. notes that, even before the 1959 revolution, “Memory of the past implied a purpose to pursue, beckoning Cubans to finish the task begun by their parents and grandparents” (15). Cubans’ sense of the past has been strongly influenced by a master narrative that the state has promoted since 1959, lending much credence to Alfred Stepan’s assessment of states’ impact upon societies (xi–xii). This

master narrative drew on pre-1959 historiography to legitimize the Revolution, portraying it as the definitive realization of the nation's nineteenth-century aspirations for sovereignty (Miller 147, 151; Perez 238; Quinn 379, 382). Continuity also suggests "a myth of interchangeability between old and new revolutionaries" (Quinn 385). This myth equates reverence for historic martyrs with patriotism and passionate support for the Revolution. The intertwining strands of the narrative that are present in the foco are: continuity, rebellion, struggle, and mobilization.

In the seminar "Public History and Memory," I continued to ponder ways that governments and other stakeholders shape public representations of the past. My final project was the website <https://choncholi.weebly.com/>, which explored the story, performance and significance of "Choncholí se va pa'l monte." This refrain is strongly associated with the legendary nineteenth century Black general Guillermon Moncada and his neighborhood, Los Hoyos. For this project, I looked at ways in which representations of "Choncholí" reflect the various "modes of memory" present in Los Hoyos and the larger community of color in Santiago.

In *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past*, Historian Ana Lucia Araujo defines modes of memory as different ways of engaging with the past. She sees collective memory as an aggregate of individual remembrances, passed down over time within a given group such as a family, community or nation. According to Araujo, this "mode" of memory "does not preserve the past, it rather reconstructs the past." Drawing on the work of Jan Assmann, Araujo describes "cultural memory" as "material and ritualized," using rites, ceremonies and objects to give meaning to the past (ch.1). Both modes of memory, collective and cultural, can define and strengthen group identity and influence individual

perceptions of the past. When a group mobilizes its past to assert its identity before the larger society, this can be considered “public memory;” when public memory is recognized and legitimized by political authorities it becomes “official” (ch.1). In the case of “Choncholí,” all these modes of memory are present.

In the “Public History” seminar, I was also introduced to the work of influential scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Trouillot argues that historical narratives and temporal markers are constructed, amplified and silenced by specific stakeholders. According to Trouillot, “history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both ‘what happened’ and ‘that which is said to have happened’” (2). He also notes that disputes over historical narratives intensify in proportion to their importance to specific stakeholders and communities (11–14).

My capstone project applies Trouillot’s ideas to various disputed histories. In some cases, I choose to analyze narratives and their importance to Santiago’s conga ensembles rather than try to decide which version was more accurate. For example, the founding date of La Conga de Los Hoyos is disputed: the current leadership cites 1902 (the year Cuba formally became independent), while Galis and some of the group’s rivals insist on a later date. This date matters greatly because it affects Los Hoyos’ status as “Santiago’s first conga.” In chapter 7 of the eBook, I propose that the 1902 date became more prominent because of a change in Los Hoyos’ leadership in 1999 and the possibility of a centenary commemoration in 2002.

The question of who introduced the emblematic *campana* (“bell” or iron brake drum) to the conga ensemble is also disputed. Although Galis’ book attributes this

innovation to Los Hoyos and cites eyewitness accounts, his account is not widely disseminated or accepted. Almost everyone in Santiago associates the introduction of the bell with Conga San Agustín, and this instrument is an essential part of the group's sonic and institutional identity (chapters 3 and 7). Because this issue is relatively inconsequential to Los Hoyos' leadership and community, they do not vigorously contest it.

## Methodology

### Choosing a Research Topic

According to Richard Widess, “each music, as each society, is the temporary result of continuing historical processes, processes that may or may not be important to the performer, but are arguably important to the outside observer” (219). In the realms of jazz and Cuban music, the past is extremely important to the performer. Reverence for musical ancestors can be one of a genre's essential aesthetic principles (Lapidus 62–63). For over thirty years, my percussion studies have involved learning about master musicians from the past. Influential mentors such as Bobby Sanabria, Victor Rendón, and Johnny Almendra (1952–2022) urged me to study legends of jazz and Afro-Cuban music and to know “The History of The Music.” Knowledge of and reverence for musical ancestors is an essential part of earning one's stripes as a player. My philosophy of musical legitimacy has been deeply affected by these ideas: in my view, those who claim to play “salsa” must study Arsenio Rodríguez since he is the architect of the modern sound. Because of this worldview, when I delve into a new musical genre, I always seek guidance on its history. My lessons with Lázaro in 2019 involved lengthy discussions of legendary conga musicians what they sounded like. All these experiences influenced my decision to focus my research on the history of the conga santiaguera.

## Research Questions

In 2023, after taking the City College course “The Historian’s Craft” and talking at length with Dr. Lapidus, I formulated the following preliminary research questions:

1. What are the roots of the conga rhythm?
2. Which ethnic groups and musical genres influenced the congas early development?
3. Which musicians were most important and influential during the conga’s early development (approximately 1900—1945)?

The first two questions were influenced by the work of Lapidus, Galis, and others who discuss the musical impact of Haitian migration to Oriente (Alén, Pedro, Quintanar Pérez). Lapidus explores the possible connections between Haitian migration to Oriente and *changüi* (ch. 7). Galis proposes that La Conga de Los Hoyos’ *golpe del pilón* (an early name for what is now known as conga) was influenced by Haitian *rara* (188).

In addition, scholars and performers throughout the Americas often describe Afro-Diasporic music’s roots in terms of specific African ethnic groups. This type of “roots tracing” is consistent with the “African Retentions” model proposed by Melville Herskovitz in *The Myth of the Negro Past* (7–9).

To find the conga’s musical roots, I planned to compare it to styles from Africa and its Diaspora. The available literature suggested that the numerically predominant meta-ethnic groups in Santiago around 1900 were *Congo* (from the Congo river region) and *Carabali* (the Calabar region of what is now Nigeria) (Calderón et al. 61–62; Portuondo 80–81; Millet ch. 7). Jesús Guanche and others have noted that these broad categories were imposed by enslavers and colonial governments and that they loosely correspond to large

geographic areas and slave trading ports rather than the ethnic self-identification of the people they seek to classify (Guanche ch.1, ch. 4). Nevertheless, these categories were adapted by enslaved Africans in Cuba and their descendants as they attempted to reconstruct their identities and develop religious, musical and linguistic customs conditions in resistance to slavery and racist discourses which denigrated these practices as “uncivilized.” At the beginning of this project, I had hoped to compare the conga santiaguera to musical styles from Haiti, the Congo region and the Calabar region. However, as I started listening to audio recordings, I realized that the latter two regions were so vast and culturally diverse that it would be impossible to have a meaningful knowledge of their music; disappointingly, the recordings that I found bore little resemblance to conga. The strongest musical connection I could find was the same one I had noticed over twenty years earlier: the similarity between some elements of conga and the Afro-Brazilian *congo* rhythm. After reviewing the available demographic evidence, it seemed that the direct influence of *gagá* on the early conga genre was unlikely. I discuss these two issues in chapter 2 of the eBook.

I discussed the question of the conga’s roots and influences with several friends in Santiago. Galis shared a few ideas about possible influences from the *carabalí* and *tajona* genres, and Abelardo Larduet Luaces discussed his findings about the power and influence of the *cabildo congo* (neo-African mutual aid society) in Los Hoyos. I also considered the work of scholars who critique and contextualize Herskovitz’ “African retentions” model and those who analyze Afro-Diasporic music in terms of common rhythmic traits rather than original/derivative paradigms (Burns; Garcia; Gerstin; Matory; Peñalosa). I decided to reframe and combine the “roots/influences” research questions as follows:

- What are the connections between conga and other styles of Afro-Diasporic music?

The third research question, regarding influential performers, was inspired by my long-time interest in legendary local musicians. This interest had been further piqued by Galis' and Lázaro's descriptions of the influential musicians Santiago Guibert "Nanano," (c. 1912–c. 1987) and Juan Hechavarria, "Pililí" (c. 1915–1972). Thanks to Lázaro and other collaborators, I was able to connect with musicians who had known both Pililí and Nanano. As I spoke to these elders, I began to hear about other revered artists who had been active between 1960 and 2010. Because of this and the extreme paucity of pre-1980 recordings, I expanded the temporal scope of the third question to encompass the period from roughly 1910 to 2010.

### Refining the Project

Musicians' anecdotes about competition, originality, and musical "showdowns" with rivals made me realize that competition was essential to the conga's development. I decided that an important theme in my research would be the connection between competition, prestige and conga ensembles' musical and institutional identities.

In conversations with players from various generations, I learned that Neno Betancourt (1920–1999) was widely considered to be Santiago's greatest corneta china player. Although I had initially planned to focus on percussion, I expanded the scope of the project to include the corneta. In keeping with Mantle Hood's emphasis on the "musical mode of discourse," I took a few lessons on the corneta china (Hood 230). These lessons helped shape my discussion of the instrument in chapter 4 of the eBook.

As I talked to more musicians, I realized that Santiago's three most prominent conga ensembles were Conga Paso Franco Conga de Los Hoyos, and Conga San Agustín. I

narrowed the scope of my research to focus on these three groups, which I discuss in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

## Important Sources

Oral history interviews have been fundamental to this project. The wisdom of elder musicians helped me define my goals, prepare for subsequent interviews, and choose themes and protagonists for video content.

Audio recordings, YouTube videos, and musicians' feedback helped me arrive at the "Model Groove" I discuss in Chapter 4. Musician's insights also helped me to work toward a discography of commercial conga recordings which duly credits performers where possible. Access to Cuban newspapers such as *Granma* and *Juventud Rebelde* played a critical role in my discussion of the interplay between collective and official modes of memory in the construction of conga ensembles' identities in chapters 5 and 6.

My discussion of the conga's early phase (chapters 2 and 3) draws heavily on Galis' *La percusión* and Millet and Brea's *Grupos Folkloricos de Santiago de Cuba*. Much of the chronology in these two works is consistent with the general consensus of Santiago's conga musicians. Galis' detailed chronology and transcriptions are particularly authoritative because they draw on eyewitness accounts. In addition, Galis was generous enough to discuss his research with me in filmed interviews.

As I wrapped up my research in 2025, I was granted access to another very important source: an annotated hand copied reproduction of *Registro Municipal De Comparsas Carrozas Y Máscaras* [The Municipal Registry of Carnival Troupes, Floats and Masks, "the registry"] in the personal collection of the late Yoel Rodríguez Lamarque "Yoel Quimona," (c. 1955–2025), one of Santiago's leading authorities on Carnival ("the

Rodríguez Lamarque collection”). Much of this meticulous collection of names, dates and details dating to the nineteenth century was hand copied and annotated by Yoel’s grandfather, Inocencio Lamarque Pérez, who was a member of Oriente’s Sub-Comission of Festivals and Publicity until its dissolution in 1959.

The Rodríguez Lamarque collection presents a few issues. The distinction between verbatim copying from registry records (which have their own issues) and Lamarque Pérez’ and Rodríguez Lamarque’s annotations is unclear. The list of comparsas, names of directors, and rehearsal sites was presumably copied from the registry. The commentary on cabildos, comparsas and instruments was presumably written by Rodríguez Lamarque and his grandfather based on their own research, but lacks citations or sources. One of many items of ambiguous provenance is the classification of the groups. Given that musical genres and comparsa categories emerge and become recognized over time, it is unlikely that early conga ensembles were “officially” designated as “congas” when they were registered. We are left wondering how and why these groups were classified.

## Videos

The Manifold website for this project includes original videos and links to relevant videos by other creators. The original content falls into three broad categories: mini documentaries, short interviews, and descargas (“jams”). Two of the mini documentaries honor significant musicians by compiling the reflections and performances of their protégés. “*Lo Maximo: Recordando a Pilili / Remembering Pilili*” and “*Si de corneta se trata... recordando a Neno / If We’re Talking Corneta... Remembering Neno*” are tributes to two of Los Hoyos’ legendary virtuosos.

“*Con el tamarindo / Made in the Shade*” uses San Agustín’s most famous anthem as a point of departure before presenting reflections on the group’s unique sonic identity, beloved personalities, and rivalries with other ensembles. Similarly, “*Recordando a los ases del ritmo / Remembering the Rhythm Aces*” compiles anecdotes about La Conga de Los Hoyos’ legendary players and their dedication. These videos creatively use music to move between scenes and recall the contributions of the players they honor.

The short interviews present edited footage of a single individual. In “*Vitué: Los Inicios / Vitué: The Early Years*,” Carlos Guerra Pimentel reconstructs his family history to recount his great-grandfather’s role in the founding of Conga San Agustín. Similarly, Rubildo Hylton Hardy of Conga Paso Franco emphasizes his group’s status as the direct successor to La Conga del Tivolí, which is widely believed to be Santiago’s first conga ensemble. Some details of these accounts are inconsistent with written sources such as Galis’, but they are presented as examples of collective memory rather than absolute truth. Carlos’ account illustrates the role that family ties have played in nurturing the conga and San Agustín’s group identity. Rubildo’s story is an example of a group’s “official origin story” as recalled on a particular day. These accounts are, to paraphrase Trouillot, “what is said to have happened.”

In some cases, the demonstration videos correspond to musical transcriptions in the eBook. Other clips show musicians from various generations improvising and illustrate the individual creativity that has enlivened the conga for over a century. In the *tambora* demonstration by Jesús Milanés, I added brief textual commentary, allowing viewers to engage with basic musical analysis without reading a transcription.

## Perspectives from Music Theory

The explanatory frameworks most relevant to my work are from the fields of History (discussed above) and Music Theory. My musical analysis draws heavily on the work of David Peñalosa and James Burns, both of whom are practicing percussionists. These authors frame their work in terms of broad similarities throughout the Black Atlantic rather than origin/destination

Peñalosa's *The Clave Matrix* views Afro-Diasporic music as a series of interwoven patterns which create tension and resolution within a four-beat cycle. One of the author's most relevant discussions highlights the interplay of two common rhythmic patterns, the "prime" and "displaced" *tresillos* ([x..x..x.] and [..x.x..x]). These motifs are important structural elements of clave-based music and the "standard pattern" (70–73). The displaced tresillo is an essential part of my analysis of *tambora* (bass drum) patterns and variations in Chapters 3 and 6 of the eBook. My analysis of the *tambora*-pilón combination in chapter 3 is consistent with Peñalosa's description of the standard pattern's "double strokes" as transition points where the pattern shifts between prime and displaced tresillos (73).

James Burns' "Rhythmic Archetypes in Instrumental Music from Africa and the Diaspora" proposes a theory of "rhythmic archetypes:" paradigmatic patterns which serve as "building blocks in many African music systems" (1). I draw on Burns' approach to show how the conga santiaguera incorporates and alludes to these archetypes in accordance with broad Diasporic musical aesthetics.

## Literature Review: Conga Research

The music of conga santiaguera was not transcribed or researched in much detail until recently. While a fair amount has been written on the social function, racialized

connotations, and general importance of conga and carnival in Santiago (Bettelheim, Millet and Brea, Pérez Rodríguez, Wirtz, and others) and its instrumentation (Brea, Ortiz, Millet et al.), there are very few sources that directly address its music and musicians.

Millet, Brea and Ruiz' *Barrio, comparsa y carnaval santiaguero* ("Barrio") is a groundbreaking work that presents a vivid picture of La Conga de Los Hoyos. *Barrio* is the only book-length ethnographic study of Santiago's legendary carnival and its most prominent conga ensemble.

At the time of publication, the authors were affiliated with *Casa del Caribe*, a research institute and cultural center in Santiago. While three authors are credited, Jose Millet's name appears first, suggesting that he was the driving force behind this work. Millet is a prolific and frequently cited scholar who has dedicated his long career to the study of Afro-Cuban culture and religion in Oriente; Rafael Brea is a historian and Manuel Ruiz is a sociologist.

The authors' primary goal is to illuminate the conga's significance as an expression of the community's Afro-Cuban culture and heritage. The authors' analysis presents the conga ensemble and its community as a study in collectivity: individual personalities and efforts are important, but interpersonal differences are resolved in the interest of the greater good: victory in the carnival competition. My project does not deny the conga's communal nature but places more emphasis on individual performers.

*Barrio* sheds light on enduring traditions, rivalries, legendary musicians and the continuous incorporation of newer generations. Chapter 3 is extremely valuable because of its extended testimonials from key figures such as Sebastian Herrera Zapata "Chan," (1920–1999) and Ibrahín Hechavarría Roca (1930–1999). These two and others from their generation are fondly remembered by their musical and familial descendants in chapter 6 of my eBook and its

accompanying video content. I was also fortunate enough to follow up with some of the younger musicians (born between 1950 and 1967) interviewed in *Barrio*.

The three authors other than myself who have published extensive transcriptions of conga are Mililián Galis Riverí (discussed above), Canadian ethnomusicologist Lani Milstein, and American musician and researcher Richard Opheim.

Lani Milstein conducted extensive fieldwork on La Conga de Los Hoyos which yielded two articles (“La Conga: Santiago de Cuba’s Badge of Honor” in *ReVista* and “Toward an Understanding of ‘Conga santiaguera’: Elements of ‘La conga de Los Hoyos’” in *Latin American Music Review* [“LAMR”]) and a master’s thesis (“Toward an understanding of Conga Santiaguera: the Conga of Los Hoyos”) which she generously shared with me. Access to this thesis seems to only be available by visiting the Hunter College library in person. Hopefully, a digital version of this important monograph will be made public. As Holden et al. insightfully point out, “Information that cannot be found may as well not exist” (591).

“La Conga” is a great example of accessible public scholarship; it highlights the conga’s significance as a uniquely *Oriental* (Eastern Cuban) phenomenon and “an important source of pride for a region that has historically been denigrated by its western counterpart” (4). This article also highlights the importance of “Añoranza por la conga” as a prominent contribution of Santiago’s Black community to the construction of Cuban national identity (7–8).

Milstein’s thesis includes a detailed history of Santiago’s carnival, excellent observations based on conversations with musicians and participation in conga parades, and musical transcriptions that were unprecedented at the time; many of these coincide with mine and Opheim’s. I generally agree with her emphasis on the importance of the *tresillo*

and *tango-congo* (hemiola) patterns (“Toward” thesis ch. 4). I present my own analysis of their roles in chapters 2–4 of the eBook.

Milstein chose to notate percussion patterns in TUBS (“Time Unit Box System”) as cycles of sixteen seemingly “equally weighted” beats without indicating main beats, a system that I found unnecessarily ambiguous. The section on *bokú* (hand drum) patterns seems to confuse slaps and open tones, omitting the essential “un y dos” pattern and resulting in an unclear portrayal of the resulting interwoven melody (ch. 4). Milstein does not adequately distinguish between Havana and Santiago styles in her discussion of the “salon conga” and the 1940s “conga craze” (chs. 1, 5).

In her LAMR article, which is a condensed and updated version of her thesis, Milstein describes the *masón* variation of the conga as “taken directly” from tumba francesa (234). I see the *masón* as an adaptation or sonic tribute; it has much more in common with the conga-pilón rhythm than the *masón* of the tumba francesa.

I generally agree with Milstein’s discussion of the likely Congo connection (“Toward” thesis, chs. 3, 4). I explore similarities between conga and other Diasporic music in chapters 2 and 7 of my eBook. Milstein’s brief corneta china transcriptions include phrases like the *floreos* (flourishes) and the “transitional phrase” I discuss in chapter 4 of my eBook (“Toward” thesis, ch. 3). My analysis includes other common phrases like *salidas* (openings) and the “coda melody” which have not been previously transcribed. Despite a few minor flaws, Milstein’s musical analysis is thorough, and her research was unprecedented at the time of publication.

Richard Opheim’s *Conga Oriental: Traditional Parade Music of Eastern Cuba* is a comprehensive study of conga performance in Santiago and Guantanamo. While this self-

published book lacks the institutional approval of peer review or an academic press, it must be considered an important contribution to the literature.

The author interviewed members (often musical directors) of the two cities' ten principal conga groups. This work's primary strengths are the clarity of its text, the detailed organological analysis and the transcriptions. The author does a great job of explaining instrument and pattern names, which vary greatly among musicians and locales, leading to confusion and mislabeling by researchers.

Opheim's description of brake drum playing technique as creating the impression (rather than the actual sound) of two different pitches brilliantly describes a concept that is sonically and aesthetically important (19). His grouping of the bokú patterns into "families" is quite useful (48–50). In chapter 4, I propose two broad groups of bokús: straight and syncopated, and place each group within the groove's layered structure.

My findings differ with Opheim's regarding the pilón–columbia–masón cycle; Opheim considers the toque masón to be comprised of "the columbia and the toque masón proper," a description that I never heard in my interviews (57). In addition, Opheim, like Milstein, implies that performance of this rhythmic cycle is standard practice throughout Santiago. I found it to be associated with Los Hoyos and, to a lesser extent, Paso Franco; I discuss this in chapters 5 and 6.

Opheim offers excellent detailed transcriptions and analyses of corneta china melodies and coros (vocal refrains), areas most scholars have neglected (13; 79–86). *Conga Oriental* is a well written and carefully researched book which presents a plethora of important new information.

The most important distinction between my work, Milstein's, and Opheim's is that my musical analysis emphasizes the interplay between straight and syncopated layers and prime and

displaced tresillos. In addition, I devote more attention to Conga Paso Franco, Conga San Agustín, group identities, collective memory, and individual performers.

## Evaluation

*Conga Santiaguera: A Century of Innovation and Competition* makes several unique contributions. The project recognizes musicians whose names are largely absent from the historical and discographical record. The video content offers a rare opportunity to hear Santiago's veteran players share their heartfelt reflections. My musical analysis presents a unique perspective on the conga's layered groove and the corneta china's role in shaping a performance.

Several research objectives remain unfulfilled. As I refined the scope of my project in 2023, I decided that it was important to learn and publish the exact birth and death dates of Nanano and Pililí, two of the conga's most important innovators. The inclusion of vital dates and photos of musicians is an important way to restore visibility and humanity to forgotten figures. While my website does not claim to be an archive *per se*, my effort to make this type of data available is consistent with Bastian and Griffith's concept of "archival dignity" (178). Unfortunately, I was unable access archives in Cuba due to frequent blackouts and irregular hours. The approximate birth and death dates that I include are only a starting point.

Another shortcoming is the chapter on Conga Paso Franco. Due to time and logistical constraints, I was unable to interview more musicians from this group. Hopefully others will learn and disseminate more about Paso Franco and Santiago's other conga ensembles.

## Future Plans

My highest priority is to make this Capstone Project and its resources widely available. I hope to share my work on social media, podcasts, and radio programs. Education has always been an important part of my musical career, and I expect to continue to incorporate my research into workshops and other presentations. It has always been important to me to humbly recognize culture bearers whenever possible; I will continue to collaborate with *Santiaguero* (Santiago native) musicians based in New York.

Another important goal is to permanently preserve the interviews I conducted in an institutional setting. I hope to donate recordings of these conversations to Florida International University's Diaz-Ayala Cuban and Latin American Popular Music Collection or a similar archive.

Making my project accessible to Santiago's conga musicians and their communities is a big challenge. The biggest obstacle is internet access, which is prohibitively expensive for most Cubans; there is no free Wi-Fi on the island. The most appropriate and personal way to share this project with Cubans on the island will be in person. In December 2026, my good friend, teacher, and important collaborator Lázaro Bandera Malet will co-host the First International Festival of Conga, an event with colloquia and performances, at "conga central:" La Conga de Los Hoyos' foco cultural.

To quote an anonymous *arrollador* (conga parade reveler): "*Dile a Los Hoyos que yo voy pa'lla* (Go tell Los Hoyos: I'm coming)" (Valerino Giro).

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