



The Choreography of Celia Cruz en Camera: Aesthetics of Gender and Performance Through the Lens of Black Visual Studies

Elyse Veloria

PhD Candidate
Cultural Anthropology
Duke University

Abstract: Cuban singer Celia Cruz is known as the reigning Queen of Salsa. Her legacy of vibrant costumes, colourful wigs, and self-expression has captivated Caribbean writers and scholars for years, while her music continues to enchant audiences. Yet, while scholars have written about Cruz's famous "Azúcar," her lyrics, and her spectacular wardrobe, her archival photography remains understudied. Drawing on Black feminist approaches to archival photography, this article contributes a visual analysis of the rich collection of photography at the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami. An interest in the relationship between memory, embodiment, and photography drives the article, which traces Celia Cruz's choreography on camera from the archives and into the 2023 Barbie version of Celia Cruz. In so doing, the article argues for an appreciation of Cruz's interiority and for an alternative approach to thinking about Cruz's public performance. This approach is important because archival images offer an alternative way of engaging Cruz's cultural memory. The hope is that by staging encounters through photography, readers can embody a different, visual grammar of remembering Celia Cruz. Indeed, by analyzing the visual language of the archives, this article proposes a new way of seeing and hearing Celia Cruz across space and time.

Key words: Celia Cruz, photography, archives

Acknowledgements: Images courtesy of the Cuban Heritage Collection University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, Florida.

How to cite

Veloria, Elyse. 2025. "The Choreography of Celia Cruz *en Camera*: Aesthetics of Gender and Performance Through the Lens of Black Visual Studies." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* (16): 183–210.

“how would it truly be to have danced
with Celia Cruz, unsmiling.”
(from Dionne Brand, *Inventory*)

After her death in 2003, Cuban salsa legend Celia Cruz is now being commemorated through visual culture in the United States. She will be the first Afro-Latina to be featured on a U.S. coin, and early in 2023, she was recreated as a Barbie doll. However, at the height of her fame, numerous journalists and scholars remarked that Celia Cruz was not considered beautiful, slim, or young. In her analysis of Cruz's autobiography, Frances Negrón-Muntaner observes that “ugliness appears in Celia's story of self as the one major liability that she had to overcome,” suggesting that Celia turned to distinctive style and spectacular fashion rather than trying to ascribe to conventional conceptions of beauty (2007,104). After her death, one writer described Cruz as possessing “a killer hourglass body and her face, though not pretty, was alive with expressiveness and intelligence” (Gosin 2016, 91). These conflicting narratives about race, gender, and beauty illuminate the discourse that surrounded Cruz's visual presence and shape her memory in contemporary popular culture. This article examines the political project of beauty in the Caribbean before exploring Black feminist visual theories to reframe our understanding of Celia Cruz. Looking at photographs of Cruz allows us to see and hear her differently, complicating the often-reproduced narrative about her beauty to better understand Black femininity through aesthetics, style, and performance via photography.

I build on the plethora of scholarship about Celia Cruz's voice and lyrics and instead mediate on photography as a medium for addressing the choreographed performances of beauty and respectability through a Black feminist lens. Theorist Jen Nash argues that beauty, both in writing and in our

approaches to visual culture, can produce new and ethical forms of witnessing, seeing, and imagining the ordinary (2019). Drawing on Black feminist visual studies, I argue that photographs of Celia Cruz, especially in her youth, offer insight into Cruz's choreography of Afro-Cuban luminous aesthetics. Throughout this article, I mediate on photographs of Celia Cruz to consider how Nash's reflection on Black feminist framework conceptualizes new stagings, performances, and articulations of beauty beyond the body (Nash 2019). I turn to the scholarship of Black feminist visual studies to analyze Celia Cruz's embodiment of beauty and luminosity through photography. Specifically, theorist Tina Campt's theorization of "listening to images" (2017) provides a productive framework that links visual media to imagination and performance by linking music with photography, which is particularly relevant for analyzing the images of a prolific singer like Cruz. Simone Browne's concept of "Black luminosity" illuminates the strategies of excess and fugitivity exercised by Black subjects, even under conditions of surveillance and demonstrates the powerful capacity of photography to shape representations of Blackness (2012). Coupled together and placed into conversation with scholars of digital studies and cultural memory, these theories suggest the possibility of photography as a poetic form which captures Celia Cruz's choreography on camera.

Together, Caribbean Studies and Black visual studies show how technologies of management and control, developed on the plantation, filter into the material and sensorial archival encounters in photography (Browne 2015; Thompson 2015; Cobb 2015). Few scholars of Celia Cruz have paid attention to the visual technologies of memory that affirm Celia Cruz's status as a celebrated fashion and musical icon within the United States. Therefore, I aim to show how theories and performances of beauty and Black womanhood are articulated through photographs of Celia Cruz and her recent representation as a Barbie Doll. I am interested in witnessing Cruz's transformation over time via photographs as she embodied tropes of tropicalization and an "aesthetics of excess" (Hernandez 2020). Turning to archival photographs of Celia Cruz departs from the tendency to focus exclusively on her voice, lyricism, and sonic dimensions. Instead, through a Black feminist visual studies framework, I focus on archival, black and white

photographs of Cruz as sites of excess and transcendence where she cultivated a sense of beauty, performance, and public memory on her own terms. As Tina Campt contends, “music offers an alternative way of knowing images” and we can read images like music to register a photograph’s affective meaning (2017, 136). For an esteemed singer like Celia Cruz, encountering her archival images by *listening* to them expands our ability to bear witness to Cruz’s beautiful and enduring legacy within popular culture. Celia Cruz’s cultural memory is often interpreted through her songs and lyrics. This article turns to a practice of listening to these archival images. Reading Celia Cruz’s archive for beauty is not about arguing how Cruz conformed to particular beauty standards or not; rather, such an approach theorizes the practice of beauty as an emotional and political performance when enacted by Black women.

A brief history

Celia Cruz continues to enchant scholars and listeners alike with her voice as “rich as molasses but agile as the hand wielding the knife that cuts the cane” (Paredes 2019). Many writers have analyzed the relationship between Cruz’s signature catchphrase, “Azúcar!” and the cultivation of sugarcane in colonial Cuba. Indeed, over the years, prominent Latin American and Caribbean scholars have made important and generative contributions at the nexus of Cruz’s spectacular performance and sugar, which have informed this article. Writer Frances Negrón-Muntaner studied sites of preservation and public memory in the United States to illuminate the importance of Celia Cruz’s shoes. Her delightful and attentive analysis of Celia’s revered gold shoes points to the way Celia Cruz’s style represented her desire to be seen as a Cuban Latina, as a decent woman, and as a queen not unlike Marie Antoinette (2007). Puerto Rican scholar Frances Aparicio has examined Cruz’s musical repertoire and her construction of Blackness through close attention to the 1998 recording of *Azúcar negra*. Aparicio argues that Cruz serves as the voice of Cuba, as a vehicle for understanding the island’s history of plantation slavery and racial dynamics (1999). Recently, interdisciplinary scholar John Mundell has

interrogated Cruz's usage of *azúcar* as a Black diasporic feminist interjection which reminds the audience of "her lineage of Black feminine performance and labour based in imperialist longings...that aim to strip her of her subjectivity" (2021, 31). These scholars, writing at the nexus of music and performance and Blackness in Latino/a Studies, provide excellent and rigorous analysis of Celia Cruz's commemoration within public institutions, her life history, and her continued importance as a trailblazing Afro-Latina. Their theoretical reflections on Celia Cruz's voice, transnational performance, and Blackness inform my interest in how visual studies provide a useful aperture for seeing and remembering Cruz anew through archival photography. While Cruz's voice has received significant attention, I draw on Black feminist visual studies to add an archival dimension to Cruz's performance, memory, and aesthetics. Building on the critical foundation established by scholars of race, gender, and music in Latin America and the Caribbean, I ask, what utility and purpose do the continued references to Cruz's self-perception as ugly serve? How can our understanding of race and beauty in the Caribbean be reconfigured to better accommodate theories of interiority, excess, and femininity? A Black feminist visual studies approach to the singer reveals how she subverted standards of white womanhood and respectability not only during her performances on stage, but through her choreography on camera.

On Beauty

Celia Cruz commanded tremendous respect and adoration during a period of intense racialized and gendered expectations for salsa performers. However, within the vast body of literature on Cruz, she was repeatedly described as ugly, not pretty, or lacking sensual appeal. Throughout her 2004 biography are scattered references to her self-perceived ugliness in contrast to her beautiful voice. Cruz would describe herself as ugly yet loved by the public in interviews, acknowledging the pervasive racialized and gendered standards of beauty that surrounded her. As Negrón-Muntaner observes, "if Celia was going to sing salsa – that is, Black music – and was not deemed beautiful enough to be

appreciated by the eyes of strangers," then her style enabled her to be associated with "abundance, dignity, talent, Cubanness, beauty, femininity" and vitality (2007, 106). Celia's gold shoes, which were later donated to the Smithsonian Museum, communicated her femininity without compromising her perception as a good woman. Negrón-Muntaner further suggests that Cruz's body constituted a pervasive shame and a liability she overcame by spectacularizing her body through fabric, glitter, and bright colours. Cruz's attention to beauty through aesthetics and excessive style expressed a femininity in contrast to the male-dominated genre of salsa but also contributed to her public view as a maternal, asexual Black woman (Negrón-Muntaner 2007, 105). Cruz's feminine sensibility, expressed through her style and her masculine voice, enabled her to sidestep the question of beauty and instead develop a public persona that continued after her death in 2003.

Analyzing Cruz's public memory after her death, Monika Gosin has problematized the gendered characterizations of the singer as simultaneously mythical, masculine, and primitivistic, reinforcing harmful stereotypes of Black women (2016). As Gosin argues, journalists often narrowly focused on Cruz's body movements, while fans regarded the singer as a mother figure, replicating dominant constructions of Latinidad that exclude attention to Blackness. She notes that Cruz's ability to consciously focus on spectacle over sexual appeal "speaks to the uneasy space Black women are placed in wherein displays of sexual agency can immediately be used to condemn her; overt sexuality would make her Blackness too threatening" and therefore maintaining the conceptualization of Latinidad as raceless (97). Gosin critically examines Cruz's commemoration as a pan-Latino icon to identify the underlying narratives concerning gendered and racialized stereotypes and characteristics that persisted in descriptions about Cruz's body and music. Here, Gosin's important and detailed analysis of news reports and interviews reveals how "depictions of Celia Cruz in news stories position her as transcending Blackness while also replicating colonialist frames of reference which make Blackness, and Black womanhood, desirable" (2016, 94). Through descriptions of Cruz as a mythical, mystical, and maternal figure, these reports reproduced stereotypes of Black

womanhood as folkloric and desexualized. At the same time, songs like “Azúcar Negra” demonstrate how Cruz positioned herself within a broad framework of Afro-Latinidad dependent on the hypersexualized bodies of Black Cuban women (Aparicio 1999).

Within these discourses about femininity and public performance, I argue that archival images of Cruz display a young woman confronted with powerful ideologies of gendered and racialized respectability who nonetheless developed methods of visual performance that circumvented and even exceeded the politics of tropicalization and respectability. Instead of reproducing problematic portrayals of Celia Cruz as an older mother figure, these stylized portraits present an alternative representation of Cruz linked to glamour, beauty, and luminosity. By analyzing these photographs of Celia Cruz, we can reconsider and pay attention to the labour of Afro-Caribbean beauty through Black feminist visual studies.

Cruz’s spectacular clothing, hair, and shoes accompanied her voice to cultivate beauty through her self-presentation. She embodied beauty and extravagance through her embodiment of colour and dazzling style, working against the way Black female bodies have been constructed “as deviant, monstrous and grotesque” through images and damaging discourse (Nash 2019, 109). Analyzing beauty through Celia Cruz’s visual aesthetics is important political, ethical, and intellectual labour that resists the rhetoric of ugliness and contributes to renewed theorizations of beauty and femininity in the Caribbean. The goal of this approach is not to necessarily insist that Celia Cruz was, indeed, a conventionally beautiful or attractive woman, but to engage the political terrain of Caribbean beauty, race, and gender through photography.

Feminist theorists of colour ask not what beauty is, but what beauty does through its definitions, manipulations, and market value. Attending to the intersection of beauty and race in Latin America and the Caribbean illustrates the stakes attached to valuations, understandings, and experiences of beauty, especially within the historical, social, and political discourse of *mestizaje* to

create embodied and visual experiences through skin colour and hair (Moreno Figueroa and Rivers-Moore 2013, 133). Theorizing beauty in the Caribbean elucidates critical, unsettled questions regarding gender, race, sexuality, and nationhood. Meeting standards of beauty requires labour and maintenance, illustrating that “practices of and concerns about beauty are by no means trivial; they actually reveal the depth of racial attitudes and their consequences for the performance of femininity” through visible, affective, and embodied realms (Morena Figueroa and Rivers-Moore 2013, 133). Bodies and beauty in the Caribbean, specifically through hair and skin colour, have profound and tangible impacts on women's lives. These lived realities are enmeshed in discourses, images, and beliefs about beauty and its meanings.

Practices of self-presentation and personal style are avenues for repair and pleasure against the damaging discourse of racism and sexism in the Caribbean and its diasporas. Sociologist Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa utilizes photographs as a methodological tool to explore people's memories through visibility, multiple gazes, and the tensions between beauty, acceptability, and ugliness in Mexico (2013). Writing about race and the nation, Moreno Figueroa demonstrates that the terms of beauty and ugliness remain contested and unsettled because beauty is difficult. She remarks that “when in motion, prettiness and ugliness are produced” through relations between the individual and the gendered and racialized social context to produce beauty as an unsettled, temporal, and aesthetic feeling (2013, 142). By disentangling the different gazes of knowledge, feeling, and visibility that operate through conflicting gazes, it becomes possible to trace and destabilize the temporal and dynamic process of beautification in the Caribbean. Attention to archival photography of Celia Cruz agitates the rhetoric of ugliness that surrounded Cruz by seeing her anew. Her photographs depart from the tendency to only focus on Celia Cruz's incredible voice and indeed, hear her differently by listening to her images (Camp 2017).

Beauty in the Caribbean is a political force inextricably tied up in questions of race, gender, and visibility. Moreno Figueroa's work is instructive for how she maps beauty as “a resource and a feeling, an unavoidable lure that does

different kinds of work” in various contexts (2013, 146). Guided by a Black feminist visual studies framework, I read Cruz’s archival images to theorize beauty, femininity and affect in photography. These images offer very little explanation of the context or what Cruz thought, felt, or experienced during the making of the images, so I follow Tina Campt’s call to listen to the photographs instead. As Omaris Zamora contends, Celia Cruz cultivated an elegant and graceful affect within the limits of a music industry that demanded Afro-Latina women to subdue themselves to a respectability politics that “is anti-Black, frames the ‘good’ immigrant narrative, and one that holds itself closer to virgin or saint” in order to avoid being deemed as excessive, threatening, or dangerous (Zamora 2022, 58). Viewing archival images of Celia Cruz reconfigures our understanding of how she has choreographed, staged, and negotiated the contested terrain of visibility through photography. This intervention is important because the oversaturation of adoration and attention to Celia Cruz as a salsa icon and Afro-Latina symbol on quarters, as a Barbie, and through various museum exhibits might suggest that we know all that there is to know about her, but her archival photographs may allow us to listen to and see her from a different perspective. Combining Tina Campt’s theoretical scaffolding with Moreo Figueroa’s methodology, I now turn to selected, black and white archival images of Celia Cruz in the Cuban Heritage Collection.

Listening as a Visual Method

Visual studies scholar Tina Campt’s framework of listening to images (2017) outlines visual methodological tools for resisting visual captivity, articulating fugitivity, and understanding the circulation and production of images as social phenomena. Campt persuasively argues that music functions as an “aperture for understanding photography” because the two mediums “share a fundamental form of organization as *pattern* that structures our perceptions of both the sonic and visual” (Campt 2017, 136). She reads vernacular photography and archival images for their structural, sonic, and affective frequencies to analyze coordinated performances of gender, race, and

belonging. Much of Camp's writing returns to questions of listening, hapticity, and frequencies of possibility and futurity through photography. In particular, Camp's text *Listening to Images* deals with the quiet, quotidian archive of identification photography to tarry with the photographs as conduits of the relationship between subjects and the state. She proposes "listening to images" as simultaneously a theoretical intervention and a method which provides "access to the affective registers through which these images enunciate alternate accounts of their subjects" through refusal, rupture, and fugitivity (2017, 5). Her analysis of identification photographs engineered by the state frames sound as an embodied, affective register that can be listened to and touched. Of course, it is important to recognize that Camp's project centers on dispossessed Black subjects to theorize the labour of quiet refusal in quotidian photography, which may not appear to be immediately applicable to a celebrity like Celia Cruz. However, because Celia Cruz is an Afro-Cuban and gendered subject, Camp's incisive work teaches us to tune into the frequencies, sounds, and feelings of Cruz's archival images. Indeed, Camp's attention to "sonic and haptic frequencies and on the grammar of Black fugitivity that they enact" illuminates an expansive practice for careful witnessing to the articulations and feelings of beauty visible in archival images of Celia Cruz (2017, 11). I use Camp's theoretical frameworks to explore Cruz's musicality and lyrics through archival images, which position her as an Afro-Cuban performer, one who remains in constant movement across time and space.

Listening to staged glamour shots of a young Celia Cruz elicits questions about excess, respectability, and interiority, which are clear in her choreography on camera. Before her usage of vibrant wigs and bright dresses, Celia Cruz was an aspiring singer and performer in Cuba, negotiating the terms of her appearance and dress. These archival images, I argue, function as "still-moving-images" for their consolidation of affective labour of feeling through the sonic, visual, and haptic register of the photograph (Camp 2019, 27). Camp's interest in the "still-moving-image" invites us to zoom in on the sonic dimensions and frequencies of Cruz's archival images, especially her studio images photographed by Narcy

Studios. In two photographs, from possibly different photo shoots, a young Celia Cruz poses in a mermaid dress with ruffles. Her glossy lips, delicate eyelashes, and groomed eyebrows suggest that she was wearing light makeup for both photo shoots, one at Narcy Studios and one by an unknown photographer. From Narcy Studio's archival collection of glamorous, black-and-white portraits of singers and celebrities, it is clear that the studio specialized in photographs where the subject was carefully staged for the camera.

In the first image (Figure 1), Celia Cruz poses at a slight angle to the camera, both hands gracefully raised with elbows bent to frame her smiling face. Her fingers are loosely extended, with one palm directly facing the camera as the other hand slightly curls into itself. Her black hair is slicked and pulled into a tight bun. She wears a long, form-fitting mermaid dress with ruffles on the skirt and on the arms and sparkly detailing around the sweetheart neckline. In this photograph, Celia Cruz wears a necklace with a large cross, perhaps at the behest of her very religious father. Listening to this portrait, we encounter a version of Celia Cruz that existed before she found transnational fame and became an enduring symbol of Cubanness, Latinidad, and Afro-Latina pride in the United States. This youthful version of Celia Cruz would appear to replicate a tradition of formulaic, staged, predictable, and posed flash photography of aspiring celebrities and artists. Specifically, the sparkle of Cruz's jewelry, her posture, and her beaming smile at the camera index a performance of beauty through a genre of portrait photography. However, Cruz departs from the "melodic register" and repetition of the photographic portrait genre through key compositional differences (Campt 2012, 145). Even without colour, the photographs compel us to pay attention to the seemingly small details of her visual performance, such as the dramatic flair of her dress and the cross prominently featured at the center of the photograph. Attending to Cruz's corporeality in this portrait, this image embodies respectable glamour in alignment with an established performative portrait posture.

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Figure 1. **Celia Cruz**, Cuban Photograph collection.
Courtesy of the Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, Florida.



Figure 2: **Celia Cruz**, Cuban Photograph collection. Image courtesy of the Cuban Heritage Collection University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, Florida.

The second photograph (Figure 2) features a much more pensive Celia Cruz. I read this image as registering a frequency of interiority that sharply contrasts with the discourse of spectacular excess attached to Celia Cruz's image. Camp's invitation to tune into the haptic, affective, and aesthetic dimension of portraits by reckoning with gendered gazes and discourses of respectability is instructive here (Camp 2012). This second portrait zooms into Cruz's face, which is framed by the slight curve of a hand bejewelled with rings. She wears a tulle top and abundant jewelry, including a densely layered necklace, extravagant earrings, and a stacked pearl bracelet. In this portrait, dress and adornments communicate a gendered performance of respectability. The light contrasts in the photograph emphasize the gloss of her lips and the sparkling jewelry that decorates her wrist, necklace, and ears. The pure white of the beaded necklace and bracelet pop against her skin, whereas the light and shadow play

on her face to create soft hues of white, gray, and black. The flashy jewelry that Cruz wears, in addition to the absence of a cross, is a performance of bodily comportment that seeks to access “a racialized and exclusionary category of womanhood through the performativity of the photographic portrait” (Campt 2012, 171).

Unlike the first image, in this photograph, we are drawn to her face instead of her entire body, allowing us to notice her thoughtful expression. This portrait is quiet, registering a gendered performance that asks us to remain attentive and invested in its resonance (Campt 2017). The frequencies of this image articulate an affective register of beauty that moves me because the photograph confronts us with Celia Cruz's gaze. Her gaze enables an apprehension of the portrait that transcends a sensory level and enables an attunement “to sonic frequencies of affect and impact,” bringing together an ensemble of seeing, feeling, and being moved by Cruz's expression and performance of interiority and beauty (Campt 2017, 42). Zooming in on the sensory dimensions of the portrait, we can grapple with the feeling of beauty anew.

In this portrait, we are confronted most immediately with Celia Cruz's gaze in a way that disorients the viewer and foregrounds a concern with visibility, multiple gazes, and what Morena Figueroa describes as “displaced looks” through Cruz's performance of femininity and beauty (2013). Later in her life, Cruz would consistently comment on her self-perception of ugliness, which was affirmed by news reports and commentaries. But we can problematize Cruz's experiences of being ugly within “the gendered frames of everyday existence where the rules of femininity are clearly exposed” through clothing, hair, and jewelry, which dictate how a mainstream, white and predictable version of womanhood is reaffirmed” (Moreno Figueroa 2013, 142). At the intersection of race, gender, and multiple gazes, the expectations of respectable beauty and performance are made visible in portrait photography, and Cruz's gaze interacts with ours to demonstrate how seeing is, in fact, racialized and gendered. What is beautiful about this image is Cruz's focused and intent look slightly off-camera, made more resplendent by the jewelry that adorns her upper body.

If we understand that beauty operates in the realm of the visible and involves the interaction of multiple gazes, affect, and culture, then we can conceptualize how gazing at this archival portrait implicates us in a political discourse about beauty and Blackness. As Morena Figueroa observes, the tense relation between beauty, darker-skinned bodies, and the performance of femininity is embodied in photographs where “the racial configuration of the visual world” collides with skin colour, bodily features, and gazes (2013, 150). When our gaze meets Celia Cruz’s portrait, we see a young woman who has carefully choreographed a performance that meets the standards of acceptable and respectable beauty through her hair, delicate makeup, and steady posture. Her gaze suggests an interior world that she would notoriously protect for the rest of her life. At the same time, her excessive and luminous jewelry hints at the spectacularly colourful persona she would later assume as a performer. Looking at this quiet portrait of a young Celia Cruz on the precipice of international fame and recognition, we are called to reflect on a photograph that ruminates on a Black feminist tense of futurity – of all that is yet to come (Campt 2017). This is the beauty of returning to archival photographs of Celia Cruz. We can see, feel, and experience a new perspective on the singer that departs from the popular discourses that circulate around her as a contemporary icon, and gain a renewed understanding of her interiority through images. Theorist Tina Campt reminds us that Black visibility requires profound forms of affective labour, which enable us to attune to emotional responses conjured by the hapticity of Black life (Campt 2019). By attending to the hapticity of Cruz’s images, we can witness the luminosity of her visual archive.

Black Luminosity

Instead of reproducing problematic portrayals of Celia Cruz as an older mother figure, these stylized portraits present an alternative representation of Cruz linked to glamour and luminosity. If one of the intentions behind the formal portraits of Cruz was to emphasize her youthfulness, beauty, and respectability, they do so

by using light and luminosity with high exposure flash photography to make Cruz's skin appear lighter. These photographs contest the popular narrative of Cruz as a maternal, stereotypical, asexual figure (Gosin 2016). Turning to the theoretical framework developed by Simone Browne, this section examines how archival images of Celia Cruz can be analyzed through the concept of "Black luminosity" (2012). Browne deploys this term to describe the boundary maintenance that subjects Black bodies to be scrutinized, heightened visibility that categorizes the subject as other than human, thereby overdetermining the Black subject as hyper visible yet politically and socially dehumanized. She explains that Black luminosity "is an exercise of panoptic power" that resides in the realm of the sun, while boundary maintenance "is intricately tied to knowing the Black body, subjecting some to a high visibility by way of technologies of seeing that sought to render the subject outside of the category of the human, *un-visible*" (Browne 2019, 548). Yet Browne contends that the practice of forceful and violent illumination through the camera flashbulb cannot overshadow the creative performances of freedom that Black people enacted in moments of refusal and fugitivity.

Of course, these portrait images are not surveillance technologies. However, I argue that they do perform freedom through a visual medium. In this sense, I follow Browne's call to turn to forms of cultural production and knowledge through creative texts and expressive practices to identify "moments of refusal and critique" which are critical endeavours for Afro-Caribbean women (2019, 547). Understanding these photographs as choreographing freedom, I apply the concept of "Black luminosity" to Cruz's archival images to argue that even as Cruz adheres to gendered expectations of her performance and presentation, one can detect the moments she started to slowly depart from the visual regime of beauty and style that controlled Caribbean femininity. Placing Browne into conversation with theorist Leigh Raiford's critical interventions on photography, capture, and race, this section studies Cruz's images as expressions of Black luminosity to better understand her role within public memory.



Figure 3: **Celia Cruz (kneeled at left) with members of the Orquesta Anacaona, 1950s.**
Image courtesy Cuban Photograph Collection, Cuban Heritage Collection.
University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, Florida.

In an undated photograph (figure 3), Celia Cruz is surrounded by the all-female members of *Orquesta Anacaona*. Cruz kneels on the left corner of the frame, squinting in the sun. All the women except Cruz wear matching floral dresses with off-the-shoulder necklines and short hair. The sun is so harsh in the photograph that all the women look nearly translucent, with one woman's face nearly erased from the high exposure. With palm trees and the glimpse of an ocean behind the group, the women embody a respectable, public femininity with long, flowing skirts affiliated with proximity to whiteness at the expense of a pathological, masculinized Black Caribbean woman (Edmonson 2003). Cruz, sporting a bouffant, necklace, and strapless dress with heels, gleams in the sunshine as her arm casually drapes around the individual squatting next to her. Her darker skin tone and distinct dress mark her as separate from the rest of the women. In the light of the sun, her black hair shines, and her skin glows, luminous

in the frame. The photograph reproduces a trope of tropicalization, but Cruz, distinguished by her strapless monotone dress, stands out from the group even though she is positioned slightly off-center.

Of note is her hair in this image, which is dark and always neatly slicked back and carefully styled. Like most of the Caribbean, Black women's hair in Cuba was historically policed as part of a broader political impetus to control Black subjectivity, reproductive labour, and sexuality, and Afro-Cuban women have been socialized to prefer straightened long hair over tightly coiled hair texture through bullying or inadequate access to Black hair products (Mbilishaka et. al 2020). These experiences, visible in this archival image, are historically grounded in a colonial appetite that simultaneously desired and sexualized Black women while constructing caricatures of Black women as aggressive, seductive, and dangerous through literature and policy.

Tinsley writes that Caribbean colonies legally forbade Black or mixed women to appear in public without covered hair, wear fine jewelry or silk, or be called *madame*. To dominate the logics of femininity, sex, and gender, colonists "carefully mythologized a split between the luminous attraction of white ladyhood's receptive femininity and the glittering seduction of brown womanhood's aggressive voluptuousness" (Tinsley 2010, 13). Tinsley's usage of the keywords "luminous," "femininity," and "glittering" illustrates the conflicting visual narratives attached to imagery of Black and white women in the Caribbean. In Cuba, where lighter skin and straight hair are still associated with elite classes, a young Cruz was confronted with powerful racial ideologies that threatened to overdetermine her success as an artist and perceived decency as a Black woman. Her efforts to reconfigure the spatial and social mappings of Afro-Cuban visual and sonic performance embody a "Black luminosity" (Browne 2019) that reverberates across the archive, compelling an affective and sensorial experience of beauty through our emotional pull into the image.



Figure 4: **La Sonora Matancera y Celia Cruz.**
Image courtesy Cuban Photograph Collection, Cuban Heritage Collection,
University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, Florida.

In her book *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, Leigh Raiford conceptualizes “critical Black memory” as a historical mode of evaluation, interpretation, and political critique to frame African American social movements (2011). Understanding photography as a technique, technology, and strategy of memory that can speak back against hegemonic histories, Raiford reflects on the way icons are crystallized to become complex symbols. Using Raiford’s approach to photography as both an artifact and performance that must be consistently revisited, I am interested in how a second archival image frames Cruz to articulate gendered difference. In this photograph (figure 4), labelled “La Sonora Matancera y Celia Cruz,” Celia Cruz is featured in the middle of the all-male ensemble in a white outfit that contrasts with the men’s grey suits. While some of the men are gazing in different directions away from the lens, Cruz smiles directly at the camera. Dangling earrings frame her face, and she wears her glossy hair in a tight updo. Her jewelry, hair, and exposed bare arms starkly contrast with the heavy suits worn by the men. Like the first photograph, Cruz is

visibly different from the rest of the photograph's subjects, but the difference hinges on not only her outfit, but her gendered performance.

Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern exactly what Cruz's or the photographer's intentions were behind this image, it is more productive to interpret the photograph through its representation of Cruz. As Raiford writes, it is helpful to understand representation in photography as a set of relations which refract social practices and movements. She considers photography as between "a freedom to define and represent oneself as one chooses and a freedom from the ideological and representational consequences of dehumanizing depictions" (2011, 15). These images represent Cruz as immersed in various gendered and racialized relations as she resists the tendency to view Caribbean women as part of the political economy of Caribbean tourism and fantasy. The second image also demonstrates the male-dominated genre and industry Cruz navigated during her rise into stardom. Without a tropical background or any men behind her, the elegant aesthetics of her outfit and jewelry in these photographs anticipate Cruz's later curated assemblages of colour and texture through fashion. Her skin, hair, and necklace gleam under the flashbulb as a performance of gendered respectability, enabling Cruz to embody an articulation of womanhood that often excludes Black women. Considering the history of the flashbulb as a tool of surveillance and slavery, Cruz's performance within these photographs asserts her respectability and therefore humanity through a carefully orchestrated choreography of beauty and femininity (Browne 2012, 546). Against the narratives of ugliness that circulate around Cruz's public image, turning to her archival photographs as creative texts invites new methods of seeing and knowing Celia Cruz.

This black and white photograph, as a form of visual and cultural production, foregrounds Cruz's position as a salsa singer in a male-dominated genre and reminds the viewer of the many obstacles and challenges she faced as a young woman. Browne reminds us that we can turn to the archives and Black expressive practices and texts to identify moments of refusal and critique which engender "performances of freedom" through cultural production (2012, 547).

In these archival images where Cruz's race and gender set her apart, we can take seriously her creative ingenuity through her embodiment of daring aesthetics. Celia Cruz's luminosity as resistance and fierce perseverance shines through in these glossy archival photographs, where we can bear witness to her beautiful luminosity in the frame.



Figure 5: Screenshot of the official Barbie Instagram page. Image taken by the author on April 19, 2025.

Public Memory

Recently, Celia Cruz has re-emerged in the United States' cultural consciousness. Her likeness has been represented as a plastic Barbie doll in 2023, adorned with a glamorous, sparkly red mermaid dress, her signature gold shoes, and blonde hair. In 2024, she became the first Afro-Latina minted on the United States quarter, her face right next to the phrase "Azucar!". In early 2025, the Miami Dade College Museum of Art and Design organized an exhibit titled "Celia Cruz: Work" to honour Cruz's relentless labour and embrace of Cuban heritage. Setting aside the valid and important critiques about incorporating an Afro-Latina's visual iconography into capitalist corporations and the empire of the United States, this section examines the performance of public memory in relation to visual studies. Drawing on the archivist Tonia Sutherland's critical analysis of reparative, embodied memory work within digital landscapes (2023), this section analyzes these recent material representations of Celia Cruz.

Rooted in the groundbreaking and pioneering scholarly innovations of anthropologist and dancer Katherine Dunham, Sutherland proposes the Dunham Technique as "an epistemological framework through which to better understand and read Black memory work and to theorize modes of transmission that are grounded in Black liberation" (2023, 130). Through her investigation of the purpose and knowledge production made possible by Black memory technologies and archives, Sutherland considers the logics underpinning embodied archival methods. She explains that Dunham's work simultaneously created a technology for codifying embodied cultural memory and assisted the production of cultural memory through dance and movement. Sutherland further suggests that the Dunham Technique challenges scholars, archivists, and audiences to develop new literacies which reflect the nuances of Black culture. As she writes, the Dunham Technique and the framework of Black memory technologies encourage us to rethink "the distinctions in memory work that are coded or recognized as Black and a way to understand these practices as both cultural inheritance and technological intervention" (2023, 136). This approach destabilizes the logics of traditional approaches to archiving, which prioritize

preservation of material artifacts, the same logics which allow Celia Cruz's image to be circulated via Barbie dolls and quarters.

Following Sutherland's call to engage the Dunham Technique as a pedagogical orientation and praxis, I wish to recuperate Celia Cruz's memory from the sterile reproduction of her image in coins and dolls. While many scholars have examined Cruz's lyrics, voice, and sound as a repository for her memory, the visual dimensions of the Celia Cruz archive within cultural memory have received less attention. Sutherland posits that "to conceive of Durham Technique as a memory technology requires us to focus on who and what is remembered and who gets to do the remembering" in addition to questioning the technologies that construct and disseminate those memories (2023, 146). Under this framework, Celia Cruz's Barbie doll (see figure 5) warrants further attention for its careful orchestration of celebratory and colourful memory production.

As a Barbie doll, Celia Cruz is represented as a darker-skinned Black woman with glossy blonde hair, a curvy but lithe body, and decadent silver jewelry adorning her neck and ears. She is dressed in a bright red dress, reminiscent of the one she wore during the 2002 Latin GRAMMYS, that flares at the bottom and draws attention to her bottom half. The Barbie version of Celia Cruz shows off her gold high heels as she sings into a golden microphone, exuding glamour and glitzy flair. Interestingly, she is posed in front of an all-male band, reinforcing her struggle as an Afro-Latina in a salsa industry where few women were included. The Instagram post from the official Barbie account, in both the image and the caption, thus reinforces key narratives about Celia Cruz by highlighting her golden shoes, using bright colours and abundant jewelry, and emphasizing the importance of voice. While her representation as a Barbie doll could introduce new audiences and generations to Cruz's legacy, ultimately, Celia Cruz's colourful Barbie recirculates an epistemic framework that does not gesture to new archival possibilities or interpretations. My intention here is not to dismiss the beautiful and inspiring role of Celia Cruz in public memory, as it is important to honour and remember her Afro-Latina and Cuban heritage and audacious

style.¹ However, it is imperative to heed Sutherland's caution that Black memory work must ensure that Black memories are treated with care and respect - not deployed "in anti-Black ways in an anti-Black world" (2023, 141). Certainly, given recent federal legislative attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, Cruz's image on the U.S. quarter may be understood as more performative than transformative. It is important, even years after Cruz's passing, to remain protective and careful with how her cultural memory, aesthetics, and visual representation are circulated and reproduced.

Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn on Black feminist and visual theory to conceptualize photographs of Cruz throughout the beginning of her career and to her contemporary representation as a Barbie, analyzing them as creative and aesthetic texts and performances through photography. I have tried to show "that beauty is not merely aesthetic but an invitation to imagine a world hospitable to beauty's possibilities, arrangements, and touch," because "beauty can produce new ways of seeing and longing to be seen" that reveal the underlying frequencies sutured to imagery of Cruz as a performer, artist, and subject (Nash 2019, 111). Like many Black performers, Cruz's public perception as a respectable Afro-Cuban subject required careful, sustained vigilance, and often reproduced pervasive and stereotypical conceptions of Black womanhood as simultaneously hypersexual, dangerous, and threatening (Collins 2009; Gosin 2016). For this reason, I am taken with poet Dionne Brand's invitation to imagine dancing with Celia Cruz, unsmiling, not out of unhappiness but out of a desire to retain a stillness and interiority that was rarely afforded Cruz on a public, transnational stage. I question the assumption that we should see Cruz "with our ears first" (Rivera-Servera 2009, 146). Instead, what new possibilities and affordances are made possible when, drawing from Tina Campt's theorization of listening to images, we can listen to Cruz's visual performances of interiority and beauty? We might be able to understand how she resisted the hegemonic discourse, which presented ugliness as the most difficult liability she endured on

the public stage (Négron-Muntaner 2007 104). Bringing together Caribbean and Black feminist thought, we might access a more nuanced and complex conceptualization of beauty.

Such a poetics of performance gestures to an analytical framework of possibility that creates space for opacity, new perspectives, and even rebellion against hegemonic discourses (McKittrick 2015). Reading the visual archive of Celia Cruz for the embodiment and affective dimensions of beauty invites a deeper approach to seeing the iconic performer through the lens of Black feminist visual studies. That Celia Cruz continues to maintain such potent influence in both artistic and scholarly realms, exemplified by her public visibility through museums, coins, and dolls, is a testament to her enduring cultural iconicity and significance. Beyond spectacle, however, visualizing Celia Cruz's performances of interiority allows us to see, remember, and imagine racialized gender differently in Caribbean Studies. Analyzed through a Black feminist lens, Celia Cruz's archive and iconography as Barbie draws attention to how Cruz choreographed an articulation of beauty and interiority on the camera, producing images which continue to exceed our frameworks of Black Caribbean performance and feeling.

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¹ See an ABC News report: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/video/closer-celia-cruz-afro-latina-minted-us-quarter-114798278>