“What the Revolution Will Not Televise: Routes of Blackness in Santiago de Cuba’s Carnivalesque”

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Abstract: This paper theorizes how racialization happens through micro-mobilities—people’s movements through their immediate lived space, and how a ritualized and danced yearly procession helps racialize bodies and map race onto place while contributing to the normalization and thus the invisibility of racializing processes themselves. The July Carnival season in the city of Santiago de Cuba centers on the activities of neighborhood-based societies called Congas, which participate in both officially promoted, competitive displays and (barely) tolerated grassroots neighborhood events. Of these, the Invasion is the quintessential grassroots event, a musical and danced reworking of the 1898 battles defeating the Spanish, in which thousands follow the Conga de Los Hoyos through the “territories” of other Congas. Based on ongoing fieldwork since 2006, I examine the Invasion as a performed diagram of “routes of Blackness” mapped onto a reenactment of Cuba’s national “roots” that mobilizes the racialization of bodies, cultural forms, and neighborhoods. I focus on the upscaling potential of bodies in motion in the ongoing work of naturalizing race, thereby challenging static mappings of identity and place. I instead offer a dynamic model of how Blackness is constituted in the relation between race as a field of embodied experience and an object of discourse. It is not surprising that the mass “mobilization” of the Conga’s Invasion gets folkloricized as “traditional Black culture” and treated as a socially dangerous event, while receiving none of the state media coverage of other Carnival events.