

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

# Angelitos Negros (1948)

## Josélito Rodríguez

### OVERVIEW

Angelitos Negros is a story of prejudice and sacrifice; the plot centers around a woman who does not realize her heritage, brought up as the "white" wealthy patron's daughter, she is actually the daughter of the black maid. *Angelitos Negros* is a fusion of the 1934 Hollywood film, *Imitation of Life*, directed by John M. Stahl and a popular poem / song lyric of the same name. The song, based on a Venezuelan poet's work that reads (roughly translated), "Dear painter, why do you paint all the little angels white? Don't you know that the souls of good little black children go to heaven, too?" The poem was adapted for use in a song ("rumbera") written by a Cuban, and with the rhythm of the rumba. It was extremely popular, and one of the most popular singers of the day, Pedro Infante, sang it with much success. The film itself is a tour de force of the exotic Caribbean club music popular in the 1930s and 40s, and but often associated with the high life, mafias, government corruption (as was Havana).

The song, Angelitos Negros, became the foundation of a movie which had roughly the same basic dialectic as *Imitation of Life*; the shame of being African-American, or in this case, being African-Mexican. In *Imitation of Life*, the light-skinned daughter "passes" for white and completely disowns her dark-skinned mother, who has sacrificed her own dreams and has worked hard to provide a home and an education.

The film ends with a touching scene of forgiveness and regret— Ana Luisa is truly repentant for her harsh and mistaken attitudes and she tells her mother that she loves her. The film was very successful in Mexico and received positive notices in the U.S. as well, for its exposure of internalized racism in society. However, upon closer examination, the film's message is not so clear-cut.

### CHARACTERS

José Carlos Ruiz	Famous singer, falls in love with Ana Luisa and marries her
Ana Luisa de la Fuente	Snobbish "adopted" daughter of a wealthy widower
Mercéd	Black housekeeper who is really the mother of Ana Luisa
Belén	Daughter of Ana Luisa (José Carlos's granddaughter)
Isabel	Singer who works with José Carlos, hired as nanny for Belen
Padre Francisco	Priest

### THEMES

**Prejudice:** Deep-seated prejudice or racism against Blacks is the single theme that pervades this melodrama, which was a tremendous success at its time. At the core is a fundamental irony: the most racist and hateful person in the film is also one who, coincidentally, is of mixed blood (although she does not consciously realize it.)

**Self-abnegation:** Mercé, who is the black maid and nanny, is the real mother of Ana Luisa, who is very light-skinned and who thinks she is white, having no idea that she is mixed race. The fact that Mercé perpetuates the lie about Ana Luisa's origins points to not only self-sacrifice and self-abnegation, but also a deep shame about her own identity. Unconsciously, she has transmitted some of her own existential shame to her daughter, who treats her with callousness and often scorn.

**Jealousy:** A racist, hate-filled person is an insecure person, so it is no surprise that the Ana Luisa is jealous of her husband's success as a band leader and popular singer. She is also intensely jealous of the female singers in his band, which specializes in the "exotic" – music with Afro-Caribbean influences.

**Catholic Church and Race:** The priest of the local parish knows Mercé's secret. As a member of the Catholic Church, he has been part of the system to establish categories and subcategories with the races, and to permanently label a person by their race by including it in their birth record.

**Forgiveness:** At the end, when Ana Luisa realizes that her mother was actually Mercé, she is devastated and regrets her cruelty toward her. Mercé forgives Ana Luisa for her years of rejection and abuse, and also for being responsible for her mortal fall down the stairs. This theme is a very painful one in the film, and serves as a call for tolerance and an end to racism.

## THE STORY

*Celebrity Singer:* José Carlos Ruiz, a famous singer, meets the assistant manager of a private girls' school, Ana Luisa de la Fuente. She is a beautiful woman in her 20s.

José Carlos specializes in the "sones" of Veracruz and Tabasco, as well as Caribbean music. José Carlos is not Afro-Mexican. His group consists of Black musicians as well as a mestizo (or, she could be white) singer, Isabel.

*Rehearsal:* We see the rehearsal of José Carlos's band. It is clear that he holds no prejudice towards Blacks, and in fact, respects them and has close friendships. The actor plays himself in a certain sense in that José Carlos is a heart-throb figure whose main fan base consists of working class and lower middle class women who swoon over him.

*Blackface:* It is a bit mystifying that José Carlos performs in blackface with his fellow bandmates. In the 1950s, the practice was common, particularly if a white musician wanted to be a part of an "exotic" act – in this case, Black Caribbean music. (Thankfully, his low-register voice did not make admitting himself to one of the then-popular "all girl" band acts (!))

*Wedding Bells:* Ana Luisa and José Carlos marry. Ana Luisa is pathologically prejudiced and treats all Blacks with extreme disrespect. Needless to say, she is not liked by the musicians in José Carlos's band.

*Setting up the Household:* Ana Luisa brings her former nanny, Mercé, with her, who has stayed with Ana Luisa as a personal maid. Ana Luisa is mean as a snake to poor Mercé, who is Black, and who does nothing but wait on Ana Luisa with the most servile

possible attitude. It is sickening, and José Carlos is appalled and tries to convince Ana Luisa to treat Mercé with respect. It is a futile attempt.

*Bundle of Joy.* Ana Luisa is pregnant and she and her husband joyfully anticipate the birth of their child. Joy quickly turns to horror for Ana Luisa, however, when the infant is a very dark-skinned little girl.

*A Secret is Revealed:* Mercé is at her wit's end. Unbeknownst to Ana Luisa, she is her mother. She was the housekeeper and Ana Luisa's father had an affair with her. When the baby was born (Ana Luisa), he decided to adopt her, and to keep the housekeeper, Mercé, on as her nanny. So, Ana Luisa was raised by her real mother, who simply pretended to be the nanny. In this plot twist, there are echoes of *East Lynne*, the extremely popular 19<sup>th</sup> century English sensation novel by the author, Mrs. Henry Wood.

*A Secret is Confessed:* Mercé wants to tell Ana Luisa the truth about her heritage, but the shock has been too great, and Ana Luisa is much too fragile for disturbing news. She goes to the church and confesses to the priest, Padre Francisco.

*Mean Girl (the Mother):* Ana Luisa coldly rejects Belen. Belen (weirdly also in blackface) suffers from the ongoing and continuous rejection and would love nothing more than to gain the love and acceptance of her mother.

*Even Meaner Girl (the Mother):* Mercé falls ill and is unable to take care of little Belén. Since it would be unthinkable that the hate-filled mother would take care of the little dark-skinned daughter she hold in such contempt, a proxy must be found. Isabel, the singer from José Carlos's band, generously offers. But, Ana Luisa is having nothing of that. She is jealous and accuses José Carlos of having an affair with Isabel. In the shouting match, Mercé struggles from her sickbed to advocate for little Belén. In a rage for the interference, Isabel pushes Mercé down the stairs.

*It's a Bit Late for Rapprochement:* Instead of calling the authorities and treating Ana Luisa like the racist psychopath that she is, her husband uses the moment to let her know that Mercé is her mother, and Belén dark skin came from her, not from José Carlos (despite his fondness for masquerading a Afro-Mexican). At this point it is useful to point out that no one considers the Afro-Mexicans to be real Mexicans. They are all assumed to be exotic imports from Cuba or another Caribbean nation. Ana Luisa apologizes as Mercé takes her last breath, and all is healed.

*The Healing:* In a heartwarming scene (albeit utterly unbelievable), Ana Luisa accepts Belén and the mother-daughter relationship begins anew, this time with true acceptance. Belén has not been damaged by years of verbal abuse and neglect; nor has José Carlos harbored any lingering resentment for the years of rejection, racist abuse, and emotional abandonment directed not only at him, but at his own daughter, whom he loves dearly. José Carlos is a long-suffering (to the point of masochism) angel, and it is no wonder that working class and lower middle class women in Mexico adored the actor, Pedro Infante, based on his film persona and his dreamily sentimental songs.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### José Carlos:

*Talented:* José Carlos Ruiz is a talented musician who is passionate about Caribbean music, particularly Afro-Caribbean varieties, which include the rhumba, samba, and son from Veracruz. He regularly paints his face with blackface, in theory to “blend” with his bandmates and seem more exotic, but also as a show of solidarity. For some inexplicable reason, he falls in love with the wealthy and externally beautiful, but internally rancid Ana Luisa whose extreme racism and prejudice toward Blacks belies the fact that she is mulatto. She abuses him and shows hatred toward their child. One does not know why he puts up with it.

*Compassionate:* José Carlos is compassionate and happy to keep on Mercé as Ana Luisa’s private maid and then nanny for Belen. He alone knows that Mercé is Ana Luisa’s mother – a fact that was revealed to him when their child was born with dark skin. The priest needed José Carlos to realize that the child was indeed his (and that Ana Luisa had not had an affair with one of the musicians in the band).

*Dedicated:* José Carlos is a dedicated husband, father, and musician. He is loyal to a fault and able to tolerate the most intense forms of rejection (from his wife), and critiques from society. He is dedicated to his band, and even when Ana Luisa spews jealous vituperations at him and at his lead singer, Isabel, he supports the band as well as his marriage.

*Foolish:* José Carlos allows Ana Luisa to think that his own heritage contained Afro-Mexican or Afro-Caribbean roots. He does so in order to spare her feelings, since she is bedridden with the shock of having a dark-skinned child of her loins. One could argue that he was foolish in keeping the fact that Mercé was Ana Luisa’s mother a secret. It is hard to imagine how Ana Luisa would have kept from developing deep feelings for Mercé, given that she was her nanny from the day of her birth.

### Themes

**Conscious and Unconscious Bias / Reinforcing Stereotypes:** The movie was billed as “anti-racist,” but the film actually reinforces racist stereotypes and attitudes and encourages a kind of profound cognitive bias. The protagonists of the film are a wealthy widower and his daughter, a blonde, fair-skinned beauty, who is adored for her looks and charm. She is doted upon by her father and also the Black nanny and maid who takes care of her. It turns out that the Black servant is actually the mother of the child. She had the child with the widower father (rather hard to believe, but I guess it happened all the time – see Thomas Jefferson, etc.). The pampered daughter grows up to be so grotesquely race-prejudiced that she comes across as a white supremacist. It is not clear what the audiences saw in her except that her blinding whiteness must have translated unconsciously to purity and European-level whiteness. Keep in mind that the Catholic Church still had eight different race categories that they would assign people to, with “Spanish” or “White” being for those born in Europe. If your family was from Europe, but you were born in Mexico, you were “criollo,” and if your family intermarried with indigenous, you were “mestizo” or “castizo.” If you were mixed mestizo and Black, you were “mulatto” or “barcino,” and if you were darker, you were “morisco” or “pardo” or “negro.”

**Caste Systems:** There was an elaborate caste system, and even though slavery per se was abolished in Mexico, the race-based discrimination did not. Afro-Mexicans tended to live on the coasts (especially Veracruz), and their music influenced the “sons” and dances of that region. As a result, even though many Afro-Mexicans worked as laborers, maids, and cooks, there were many who worked in musical groups in nightclubs, as musicians, singers, dancers, and assistants. The Afro-Mexicans, in such roles, were exoticized, sexualized, and commodified, thus leading to the mass delusion that they were not prejudiced, but in fact “appreciated” and “valued” the Afro-Mexicans. *Angelitos Negros* exposes that there were certainly a number of people who did not think of the Afro-Mexicans as exotic; but instead, placed them within a hierarchical caste system that placed them on the bottom.

**Racism:** In *Angelitos Negros*, Ana Luisa, the blonde daughter, now an adult and the sole heir of her father’s estate (he “adopted” her when she was a baby, supposedly from a distressed relative), becomes increasingly vitriolic in her race hatred as she matures. However, she has kept on her old nanny (in reality, her mother). One day, the daughter goes out to a night club featuring exotic Afro-Mexican dance and music, and she falls in love with the lead singer, played by Pedro Infante, and clearly intended to be considered a heartthrob.

Thoughts on the use of blackface in films: It is here that we should step back a moment and take a closer look at a film that is claiming to be anti-racist and to fervently promote racial tolerance. Pedro Infante, working with actual Afro-Mexicans, works in Blackface! Not only does he paint his face black, his fellow musician paints his entire body black! It is crazy. As we take a closer look at Nana, the Afro-Mexican maid, it is clear that she, too, is in Blackface! Their black faces are not at all convincing, and exaggerate the contrast between the blacked-up skin and actors’ teeth and skin. The spectacle of blackface is disconcerting and deeply offensive to the contemporary viewer. I’m not sure what the contemporary reaction was. At any rate, it did not seem to bother viewers too much – the film was hugely popular in Mexico. It was such a sensation that it was commented upon in *Ebony* magazine in 1950, where it was lauded for bringing racism and its cruelty into public discussion.

**Comparative Analysis:** *Angelitos Negros* and *Pinky*: It is useful to keep in mind that *Angelitos Negros* was roughly contemporaneous with *Pinky* (1948), a film depicting a light-skinned Black young woman who had been sent to the North for her education, and who, when she was there, passed as white, enabling her to find work, support herself, and study to become a nurse. She fell in love with her co-worker, a handsome, white doctor, who proposed to her, precipitating a crisis of consciousness, identity, and tremendous existential shame. *Pinky* (known as “Patricia” in Boston), fled her home and returned to her childhood home; that of her dark-complexioned Black grandmother, Dicey, who earned her living as a washerwoman, living a precarious existence in a tumble-down wood shack that did not even have glass in the windows, a bathroom, electricity, or gas. Dicey lived a Spartan life in the shadow of an old, collapsing antebellum mansion where the impoverished daughter of plantation owners, “Miss Em,” held forth as a frail autocrat on her deathbed. And yet, despite her seeming racism, she had nursed Dicey when Dicey had fallen deathly ill from pneumonia. Most poignant moments – the sharp contrast between the way *Pinky* was treated when considered “white” and when she was considered “colored.” It was painful. *Pinky* could not have gone on with the deception. If she had, there could have been a problem if she and her husband had children. They

could easily have had dark skin. I don't know if you've read "Desiree's Baby," a short story by Kate Chopin. In that story, Desiree is a very light-skinned (it seems weird to use that word or term) woman who seems completely of the white race. She marries a wealthy landowner, Armand, and they are happy until Desiree gives birth to a child, who has very dark skin. Everyone thinks that Desiree has heretofore unacknowledged black heritage, but the reality is that Armand's mother was Black. The horror and shame are pretty extreme, and I suppose that in some societies, there could be legal consequences. According to the Code Noir from 1683, adopted throughout the French Empire, it was illegal for races to marry (although they obviously did mix and had children together).

*Angelitos Negros* tacitly accepts racism when Ana Luisa de la Fuente, the blonde mother in *Angelitos Negros* spews hatred and abuse toward her own daughter and also toward all Blacks. It's amazing that her husband, José Carlos, would put up with it, especially considering that he is a popular singer with a successful Latin band that specializes in Afro-Caribbean music from the coast of Mexico. It seems very strange (and offensive) by today's standards, to see José Carlos paint not only his face, but his body to masquerade as an Afro-Mexican in his band. It's also disconcerting to realize that the actress who plays Mercé, the nanny and unacknowledged mother of Ana Luisa, is in blackface. I think the child actress who plays her daughter, Isabel, is as well. The film has many scenes that are almost unwatchable, they are so cruel. The same can be said of *Pinky* and, for that matter, *Imitation of Life*. After Ana Luisa pushes (sort of accidentally) Mercé down the stairs, José Carlos tells her the truth. When she rightly asks what took him so long, he explains that she seemed so fragile. The only other person (beside the mother, of course), who knows the secret is the Catholic priest of the local diocese.

Mercé conveniently dies before Ana Luisa has to publicly acknowledge her mother. *Angelitos Negros* is meant to rehumanize Afro-Mexicans, but by having the principal characters in blackface, it undermines its own message in several different ways. *Pinky* and *Angelitos Negros* (and also *Imitation of Life*) address the issue of shameful secrets, especially those that have to do with one's origin or aspects that form one's essential nature. It is about "passing," which not only applies to race, but also to one's beliefs (For example, of all the Jews who had to practice their religion in secret during the Inquisition, for example).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When José Carlos Ruiz performs with the "Cuban" band in nightclubs, all the other performers except the singer, Isabel, are black. José Carlos paints his face and skin a dark brown in a practice known as "blackface." As you watch the scenes in which he appears in blackface, what are your first impressions? As you consider the music itself, the other performers, and the context, how are African-influenced music and dance exoticized? What are the implications for a sense of identity? Of "Otherness"?
2. Please describe Mercé's behavior when in the presence of Ana Luisa. How might her behavior be perceived as self-effacing, even self-deprecating / demeaning? How might Mercé's tremendous sacrifice to stay with her daughter unwittingly communicate a subservience and willingness to tolerate abuse?

3. How does Ana Luisa mistreat Mercé? Describe her behavior toward Mercé before and after the birth of Belén. How does it change?
4. Evaluate the decision by José Carlos to keep the fact that Ana Luisa is, in fact, the daughter of Merce, a secret? What does the fact that Mercé does not (or can not) reveal to Ana Luisa that she is her mother say about the society at the time, and also the potentially disruptive force?
5. What are some of the techniques that the film uses to emphasize the “Otherness” of Mercé and Belén? How are the Blacks in the film marginalized and not allowed to have full access to the culture at large?

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The movie poster for "Angelitos Negros." Although Rita Montaner, who played Mercé, is Cuban, she uses dark makeup on her face ("blackface") as does the little daughter, Belén.



Ana Luisa marries the dashing popular singer, José Carlos Ruiz. In real life, the actor who played José Carlos, Pedro Infante, was a dashing popular singer as well.



Another movie poster for the film. This one includes the three main actors: Pedro Infante, Rita Montaner, and Emilia Guiu.



Although Ana Luisa rejects her daughter, Jose Carlos shows her great love and kindness. He is equally kind to Ana Luisa's mother, Mercé.



Mercé, the nanny (but really the grandmother) plays with little Belén.



Belén asks her father why her mother does not love her.