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Cuban American Literature

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LITERATURE, CUBAN AMERICAN

An assessment of Cuban literature—prose and poetry—in the United States implies a concern with linguistic, ideological, and methodological issues of interpretation. Implicit in all approaches to this literature are a variety of issues: What is the relationship between these writers and their history? From what perspective can we speak of the Cuban and Cuban American literary output, given its varied stance before its diasporic history, as well as the diversity of languages and ideologies that inform it? What are the differences between an exilic, a hybrid, or an ethnic perspective?

Since early in the 19th century, Cuban exiles in Florida developed a literature written in Spanish that reflected their ideological, social, and economic condition of exile and displacement. The most prominent figures of this period are poet José María Heredia (1803–1939) and poet, intellectual, and political activist José Martí (1853–1895). The Spanish-American War of 1898 emphasized the role of this dislocated community, and throughout the first half of the 20th century until the 1958–1959 revolution by Fidel Castro in Cuba, a number of minor Cuban American authors emerged in Florida. More importantly several authors from the island were associated with the Floridian constituency. One should add that prior to Castro's arrival, some Cuban authors also lived in other parts of the United States, including New York City.

Presently, Cuban writing outside Cuba is being created by a variety of generational and linguistic groups who reflect the migratory waves that have occurred since 1959: Camarioca in 1965, Mariel in 1980, and the rafter exodus of Cojímar in 1994. These consecutive yet different waves of immigration from Cuba to the United States have produced a unique pattern of exchange and renewal between the various generations of intellectuals in exile. While these exchanges have been quite fertile in creating an artistic renaissance of sorts, especially in the realm of music and the visual arts, the new voices coming from the island have also added complexity to the study of extraterritorial Cuban literature at the fictional and poetic levels and also at the level of autobiography. Indeed, what we have at present are several generations of writers producing their works simultaneously in English and Spanish and often from contrasting perspectives.

Even if the themes of exile and displacement seem to be a constant in the literature of the various groups, the perspective from which the story of diaspora is conceived and told varies considerably. For instance, the amount of time the authors lived in Cuba before coming to the United States becomes a barometer that determines the way the writers perceive their native country in their stories of exodus, as well as the manner in which they engage the United States as their adopted country. Such variations in perception and engagement toward the native and the adopted land become evident if we compare the narratives of diaspora written by the first exiles with those of the second and third generation writers. While there is a commonality among the writers—all share a diasporic experience that produces a narrative based on memory and that is shaped by the dimensions of history, identity, and culture—there are also marked differences between them. For if history drives the writing of the exiles, identity becomes the main issue for the hybrid writer whose literature displays a self ruptured between languages and cultures. Taking into consideration these variants, this essay's approach to the diverse corpus that constitutes today's Cuban American prose and poetry is not strictly based on the traditional concept of generation nor does it base its conclusions on the dates the writers arrived from Cuba. Instead, the linking factor among the writers is the presence of a shared perspective toward the idea of exile and displacement. From this analysis, three distinct sensibilities emerge in the fiction, poetry, and autobiography that can be grouped under the categories of exilic, hybrid, and ethnic.

Exilic Writing

The exilic perspective displays openly the authors' relationships to Cuban history, since these narratives offer literary representations of the early years of the 1959 revolution and the ensuing exodus. Whether they left Cuba for the United States in the early 1960s, such as Lino Novás Calvo (*Maneras de contar* [Ways of Telling], 1970), or in the 1980s and 1990s, as in the case of Reinaldo Arenas (*El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas* [The Palace of White Skunks], 1980; and *Otra vez el mar* [Farewell to the Sea], 1982), and the poetry of Heberto Padilla and his memoir *Self-Portrait with the Other* (1989), most works reflect the themes of treason, betrayal, and existential solitude by means of a tragic discourse of

lamentation and denunciation. Most often the stories are overtly political in nature and present the writer's ideological stance against the injustices of the revolution.

An exilic sensibility can be observed in the works of internationally known writers who have died in exile such as Calvo, Arenas, Eugenio Florit, and Padilla. It also comprises authors who are still very active and publishing today, such as Hilda Perera (*El sitio de nadie*, 1972), and Matías Montes Huidobro (*Desterrados al fuego* [Exiled to Fire], 1975; and *Parto en el cosmos* [Birth in the Cosmos], 2002). Written originally in Spanish, these narratives are often published in English translation, as in the case of works by, among others, Arenas and Montes Huidobro.

The exilic expression is multilayered in terms of chronology for it encompasses the works of those writers who arrived in the United States in subsequent migratory waves following the first exodus of the 1960s. For instance, writers such as Arenas and Carlos Victoria, who arrived from Cuba in the 1980s during the Mariel boatlift, had been educated in Cuba and had begun to write their first works on the island. Similar to the first exiles, their writing shares many of the concerns of the older exiles although their life experiences, or *vivencias*, growing up under Castro are necessarily different from those of the first exile group. Some of these writers left Cuba for the United States as adults and had begun successful literary careers while in Cuba. Others, although educated on the island, published their very first works in the United States. The narratives of Carlos Alberto Montaner, José Sanchez Boudy, and Celedonio González (*Los primos* [The Cousins], 1971), are representative of this last category.

During the 1980s the works produced by the Mariel generation renewed the exilic perspective. Known as the *Generación del silencio* (the Silent Generation), the writers of Mariel feel a need to recover the time they had lost in Castro's Cuba. Under the leadership of Arenas, the journal *Mariel* was created in 1983. Among its contributors were poets, essayists, and novelists such as Roberto Valero, Jesús Barquet, Victoria, Rafael Bordao, Carlos A. Díaz Barrios, Esteban Luis Cárdenas, Andres Reynaldo, and Juan Abreu. The challenge for writers from such diverse backgrounds and experiences was to be able to create and to imagine far from their native country.

In Arenas's *The Doorman* (1991) and his autobiography *Before Night Falls* (1993), the challenge for

the author was to be able to create and imagine away from the native land. During one of his many sad meditations, Arenas's doorman-protagonist refers to the United States as "this other place where we now survive, but where we don't exist because we no longer dream." Arenas perceived his literary task in terms of the space lost and from the spaces and the geography he could no longer see. The United States as an adopted homeland becomes a necessary evil that must be accepted, the only place for the exile writer who knows that a return to the native land will never be possible. Arenas's writing bridges the first and the second stages of Cuban writing in the United States owing to its strong exilic ties to the previous writers, but also because it shares many of the autobiographical concerns of writers whose work exhibits a hybrid sensibility.

Hybrid Writing

A distinct sensibility toward the exiled predicament is expressed by the writers who arrived in the United States as adolescents or preadolescents. The group includes writers who had Cuban childhoods and United States adulthoods. They are both Cuban and American or perhaps they are neither. These writers turn toward the past, not to confront history or lament their loss as the first exiles had done, but rather to search for a way to balance the disparate elements of their existence, such as their Cuban past and their American present. The issue of English or Spanish as a linguistic choice is a question intimately linked to the individual writer's conception of his or her artistic identity. The poems and stories of this group appear collected for the first time in Carolina Hospital's 1988 anthology *Los atrevidos* (The Daring Ones), and the group is baptized as the "one-and-a-half" generation by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in his *Life on the Hyphen* (1994). The prose works of the hybrid writers are configured into four important expressions: the autobiographical memoir, fictions of community, poetry, and narratives of geographical and historical crossings.

Through the autobiographies and personal essays of these writers, the personal and the historical dimensions of their lives come together. Cuban American personal constructions of self are intimate and public since they reveal personal details of the life of these authors and undertake the reconstruction of a culture and of a lost past. There is a documentary or testimonial character to these texts that stems from a

desire to sound real, to achieve authority. Their thematics, although situated sometimes in opposing ideological perspectives toward the national space, engage the issue of biculturalism as a lived reality and as a social construct.

In order to write about Cuba, the Cuban American writers of the "one-and-a-half generation" had to make present a history that had been past and marginal to them. The children of exile utilize the autobiographical stance in order to reinvent themselves in a new language. Pablo Medina's *Exiled Memories* (1990), Gustavo Pérez Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba* (1995), and Virgil Suárez's *Spared Angola* (1997) recall the Cuba in which they spent their first decade. Although these works revisit experiences of a Cuban childhood, they also exhibit an emotional and ideological interaction between the writing self and the self recalled. On the other hand, the autobiographical memoirs of women writers such as María del Carmen Boza (*Scattering the Ashes*, 1998) and the essays of Eliana Rivero ("Fronteraisleña: Border Islander" in *Bridges to Cuba*, 1994) and Ruth Behar ("The Biography in the Shadow," in *The Translated Woman*, 1993), exhibit a different perspective than that of their male counterparts. In the case of the women writers, the deployment of identity is geared to the U.S. reality and takes into consideration issues regarding the traditional place of women and minorities in U.S. society, as well as the lack of freedom accorded to their gender.

Hybrid writers also write novels that address issues of the U.S. Cuban community as a collective entity. Crucial within this category are Roberto Fernández's novels *Raining Backwards* (1988) and *Holy Radishes!* (1995). Fernández's narratives become central in the validation of Cuban American ethnic culture and values as they exist in Miami and other parts of the United States. His novels look at life in exile and beyond and ask how the Cuban community coexists within the dominant Anglo culture. By looking at Fernández's fictionalized Cuban American communities and their interactions with their dominant Anglo counterparts, we learn a significant amount about the history of these exiled communities as they evolve outside their native country. On the other hand, novels such as Elías Miguel Muñoz's *The Greatest Performance* (1991) and Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo* (1996) and *Days of Awe* (2000) dramatize the intersection of these authors' gay and lesbian fictional selves in fictions about U.S. Latino

communities that do not always accept them. Finally, authors such as Pablo Medina (*The Marks of Birth*, 1994, and *The Return of Felix Nogara*, 2000), Joaquín Fraxedas (*The Lonely Crossing of Juan Cabrera*, 1993), Ricardo Pau-Llosa (*Bread of the Imagined*, 1992, and *Vereda Tropical: Poems*, 1999), and Margarita Engle (*Skywriting*, 1995) create fictions and poetry of geographical and historical crossings that feature Cubans who reside both in Cuba and in the United States. Although some of these novels and autobiographical works vary in their perspective toward Cuba, all of them become a means to ensure the survival of a collective identity.

A significant number of "one-and-a-half generation" writers continue to publish exclusively in Spanish. The presence of a Spanish corpus in Cuban American letters is a unique phenomenon that responds to the existence of Spanish-dominant exile enclaves such as Miami and the cultural influence that the frequent immigration patterns of Cubans as a group have had on the enclave within the last 40 years. Poets such as Lourdes Gil, Iraida Iturralde, Maya Islas, José Kozler, Octavio Armand, and Uva de Aragón, who arrived in this country as adolescents, write in Spanish from Miami and from the New York City area. These writers feel that it is their Spanish that maintains an essential continuity with the tradition of Latin American letters. It should be noted that authors who have up to now published in English have published their most recent works in Spanish. For example, Pérez Firmat's *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio* (Fifty Lessons of Exile and Desexile, 2000), Roberto Fernández's *En la ocho y la doce* (Between Eight and Twelve Streets, 2001), and Pablo Medina's *Puntos de apoyo* (Spaces To Lean On, 2002). The linguistic diversity of the hyphen generation offers invaluable information about a cultural system that is in constant flux and that produces works at times in English and at times in Spanish. The major challenge for the members of this hybrid generation would be to learn to balance within themselves the distinct cultures that are part of their identity.

Ethnic Writing

Can two cultures be expressed through a single language? Cuban American ethnic literature places greater distance between the writer and the aftermath of the 1959 revolution. Ethnic writers take up issues that have mainly to do with their bicultural selves and

how their dual cultures affect their present in the United States. Some authors learned English and Spanish simultaneously as young children. Others, in fact, never really mastered the Spanish language, although they heard it in their homes from their parents and relatives. Their narratives express a need to transcend contradictions as well as a need to cope with the loss of Spanish as a creative language. Ethnic Cuban Americans feel the need to leave a record of the story of a community split by history, a record that up to the 1990s had remained untold. Cuban American ethnic novels and stories exhibit an archeological need to review, recover, and rediscover a lost heritage. They join an already existing corpus of U.S. literature of Cuban heritage, not explicitly about the stories of the 1959 revolution, which is central in the appraisal of English literature of Cuban heritage in the United States. This body of writing comprises authors such as Pulitzer Prize-winner Oscar Hijuelos (*The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, 1992) who lived in the United States prior to the 1959 exodus and whose perspective toward the national space is quite different than that of the hybrid or “one-and-a-half” generation.

Since the early 1990s ethnic Cuban Americans have begun to establish themselves as a significant writing presence in the United States. Led by Cristina García’s pioneering *Dreaming in Cuban*, 1992, and *The Aguero Sisters*, 1997, a plethora of novels by American writers of Cuban heritage has been published. Among the more recent are Ernesto Mestre (*The Lazarus Rumba*, 1999), Beatriz Rivera (*Playing With Light*, 2000), Andrea O. Herrera (*The Pearl of the Antilles*, 2001), and Ana Menéndez (*In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*, 2001, and *Loving Ché*, 2003). The appearance of these works provides strong evidence of the fertile creativity of this growing body of writers.

Ethnic Cuban American writers examine narratives that imitate the structure of autobiography by way of protagonists who seek the capacity to tell their own stories. Here the idea of communication among the various Cuban communities is crucial as the characters meditate on language and confront the possibilities of both English and Spanish. Some of the narratives go back to the pre-1959 Cuban past, while others consider the Cuban present and the aftermath of the revolution. The novels display modernistic narrative strategies, such as embedded texts and fictional writers in order to articulate issues of cultural

MY CUBAN BODY

“Hot pants” is what we called the very tight shorts we used to wear in the ’70s. One hot Friday night when I was fifteen years old, I sneaked out of the house wearing a shiny blue plastic raincoat over my hot pants and my spandex tube top. It was Mami’s idea to put on the raincoat over the hot pants. She wanted to avoid Papi’s anger when he saw my clothes, or lack of them. My petite older sister (by two years), two inches shorter and thirty pounds lighter, dressed the same way. So what was the problem? The problem was that I was younger but I had developed sooner. Plus, the fashion in the ’70s only helped to attract attention to my early development. It was impossible to hide curves and protrusions within minuscule pieces of cloth or skintight polyester blouses and pants. In Papi’s eyes, I was flaunting my womanhood, yet I didn’t have the maturity to deal with its consequences. His instincts were right, but his volatile approach was not.

Excerpt from “My Cuban Body” by Carolina Hospital, in *Wáchale!: Poetry and Prose about Growing Up Latino in America*, edited by Ilan Stavans (2001).

displacement. The metatext, which dates back to Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, is a very useful literary strategy for the ethnic writers since it allows them to collect, rearrange, and interpret the splinters of a history that has never made sense to them.

Retracing the remembrances of their elders becomes an obsessive task for some of these writers, since the past that had been real for the older exiles can only be imagined by these American authors of Cuban heritage. Authors such as Andrea O. Herrera and Ana Menéndez become passionate detectives who want to balance and evaluate the memories of their elders. What they find once the search has ended varies. In Menéndez’s story “My Mother’s House,” the protagonist returns to Cuba to see for herself a house that, up to that point, had existed only in her imagination. Ethnic U.S. Cuban writers pose an important question in their creative works that relates to the vicarious memories that have made them writers: Can they ever escape their family’s past?

In the realm of poetry a number of important voices have also embarked on work that explores

the labyrinth-like relationship between the past and present, which results in a poetry of identity that is often built as a hall of mirrors. Pablo Medina, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and Virgil Suárez have published collections about their bilingual, bicultural quests to find a place of their own far from Cuba and within the multiethnic society that is the United States. Theirs is a poetry of the self in constant mutation. Gender and sexuality play major roles in the oeuvre of Rafael Campo, who examines his identity as a Cuban gay doctor in books such as *The Other Man Was Me* (1994), *Diva* (1999), and *Landscape with Human Figure* (2002), as well as in essays on the role of compassion in poetry and medicine. And Alaida Rodríguez (*Garden of Exile*, 1999) ponders her lesbianism through poems that deal with politics, exile, and assimilation.

A Literature in Progress

During the years encompassed by the narratives that make up this panorama, the historical perspective on the events of 1959 has experienced a dramatic evolution: from the pressing reality of the Cuban exile writer to the distance of the ethnic writer of Cuban heritage. Beyond the tide of critical interest and prominence of works by individual writers, five significant anthologies containing the work of over 70 Cuban American writers appeared in print during the 1990s: *Bridges to Cuba* (1994), *La isla posible* (1995), *Más allá de la isla* (1995), *Little Havana Blues* (1996), and *A Century of Cuban Writers in Florida* (1996). All five mark a moment of emergence of artistic voices, which have reached intellectual maturity. Not since the publication of *Contra viento y marea* in 1978—an anthology of anonymous prose writings by the pro-Cuba and U.S. dialogue children of exile—had a similar effort toward the expression of a collective identity outside the national space emerged in the literature. In addition, U.S. journals devoted to Cuban literature such as *Caribe*, edited by Jorge Febles and Armando González Pérez, as well as *La Habana Elegante*, an online journal edited by Francisco Morán (www.lahabanaelegante.com), are creating a moment of vitality in the production of extraterritorial Cuban letters. The almost simultaneous appearance of these novels, journals, and anthologies points to the idea of the birth or emergence of a new tradition. This publishing boom also highlights the relationship of Cuban American literature in English to peer communities of writers, namely U.S. Latinos, the Cuban Americans who have opted

to publish in Spanish while residing in the United States, and the community of Cuban writers who left Cuba during the 1990s and now reside in Mexico and Europe.

It must be noted that many Cuban writers who became exiled after 1959 did not settle in the United States. Central figures in Cuban-exile literature, such as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, have lived in Europe since the early 1970s as did Calvert Casey and Severo Sarduy. Other Cuban-born novelists write today from a variety of locations. For example, Mireya Robles (*Hagiografía de Narcisa la Bella*, 1985; *La muerte definitiva de Pedro el Largo*, 1998) and René Vazqu ez D az (*La isla del cundeamor*, 1993) visited Miami periodically but permanently resided in South Africa and Sweden respectively. Similarly, the playwright Jos e Triana and the poet Nivaria Tejera lived in Paris for a number of years. Most of these writers have created their Spanish works in isolation and away from Cuban communities. They have fought to preserve the cultural traditions that existed in Cuban letters before the revolution, even if some, like Robles, have been away from the national soil for as many as 37 years.

The 1990s. As a result of the break up of the Soviet bloc in 1989, Cuba lost Soviet subsidies and fell into a period of economic hardship known as the *Per odo especial*, also described by the Castro regime as a “special period in peacetime.” No longer able to support its artists, the Cuban government allowed them to travel abroad as well as to sell their works in foreign countries. Many of these writers and essayists decided not to return to Cuba and settled in cities such as Madrid, Paris, and Mexico City. This recent immigration wave became known to some as the “velvet exile,” since these artists were able to travel back and forth from Cuba. The 1990s diaspora authors, born and educated under the revolution, write essays and novels that reflect a picture of a country in crisis. The members of this group exhibit in their works a perspective that is, above all, exilic and that is sometimes critical not only of Cuba’s present regime but also of the Miami Cuban community.

Similar to the writers who left Cuba in the 1960s, the authors of the 1990s had begun their intellectual careers in Cuba by the time they became exiles. An important dimension of the literary production of the 1990s exodus is the narrative of its women writers. Works such as Zo e Vald es’s *La nada cotidiana*,

1991; *Yocandra and the Paradise of Nada*, 1995; and *Café Nostalgia*, 1997, explore aesthetically and with success the limits of eroticism and pornography. Other writers such as Daina Chaviano, Marcia Morgado, and Yanitzia Canetti use parody and sexuality as analytical and critical dimensions of their novels. To this dynamic group of women narrators we must add Mayra Montero (*Como un mensajero tuyo*, 1998, and *El capitán de los dormidos*, 2002) who left Cuba in the 1960s and has since resided in Puerto Rico.

In addition to the novels published originally in Spanish, many available in translation, the exodus of the 1990s has created journals and editorial houses that have stimulated the contact between the Cuban writers residing in the United States and those in Europe. In Madrid *Encuentro*, founded by deceased writer Jesús Díaz, and the *Revista Hispano Cubana* led the way among the many publications related to Cuba and its literature. Most important, Spanish editorial houses such as Colibrí and Casiopea publish and translate the works of Cuban and Cuban American scholars and writers, thus providing a needed linguistic cohesion for extraterritorial Cuban literature. Not only do these publishing houses facilitate the simultaneous publication of works in English and in Spanish, but also they provide new venues for the creative work being produced by Cubans around the globe.

What shape the future of Cuban American writing in English will take is hard to predict, since the majority of the authors mentioned continue to evolve their vision of their absent community in exile. It is clear that U.S.-Cuban narratives in Spanish will profit from the invigorating influence of recent works produced outside the United States by the 1990s generation and vice-versa. In addition, a very promising literature will continue to be produced by Cuban American ethnic writers, in particular the women who are introducing in their fictions not only the concerns of biculturality but also gender issues common in the literature of other U.S. Latino literatures. As long as new waves of immigration from Cuba to the United States carry with them writers of all ages, an exilic literature in Spanish as well as a hybrid and an ethnic literature in English will continue to exist side by side.

RELATED ARTICLES

Arenas, Reinaldo; Exile; García, Cristina; Hijuelos, Oscar; Literature of Exile; Martí, José

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LITERATURE, DOMINICAN AMERICAN

Contrary to what is commonly believed by many, Dominican literature written in the United States is not a recent phenomenon. There is an early Dominican presence in literary circles and in publications that include works by the modernist poet Fabio Filallo (1866–1942) and the earliest creations by a young Pedro Henríquez Ureña (1884–1946), who was living in Washington, D.C., and, under the pseudonym