

# Introduction

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## **“Exilio es Olvido”**

by Pablo Medina

Exilio es olvido (recuerdo)  
Idilio (sonrisa), mordida

La fruta sin sabor  
Junto el mar (plato azul)

Lamido de olas,  
Nunca más ardor.

## **“Exile is a Forgetting”**

by Pablo Medina

Exile is a forgetting (remember),  
an idyll (a smile), the bite

of a fruit without flavor,  
near the sea, (a blue dish)

lapped by waves,  
never a passion.

Generally speaking, Cuban diasporic discourse has taken two distinct trajectories, which are articulated simultaneously at the intellectual and public levels. On the one hand, a comparatively small group of Cuban intellectuals of the Diaspora have been engaged for years in redefining what Homi K. Bhabha terms the ‘idea’ of the nation as it has shifted over time; however, their deliberations have been largely confined to scholarly journals and academic venues such as conferences and symposiums and read almost exclusively by the *literati* community. By contrast, a public discourse—long monopolized by a small sector of the Cuban exile population residing in the United States and widely publicized and distorted by the national and international media—has gradually established itself as the representative narrative of displaced and dispossessed Cuban identity. Over the decades it has created the illusion of a coherent vision of national, cultural, and political exile identity.

In the attempt to normalize the experience of loss for a span of nearly half a century, this particular narrative of the Cuban exodus reflects a self-definition that determines who can and cannot lay claim to a Cuban cultural identity or consciousness, and largely overlooks the diversity and asymmetrical power relations or *indices of differentiation* (to borrow Paul Gilroy’s terminology) that exist among the various groups and generations within the Diaspora. As a result it virtually excludes or dismisses sustained discussions of subjects such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, generation, and sexual or religious orientation. Evolved as a form of self-affirmation for the collective identity as well as a means of cultural

and psychic survival, and positioned against and fortified by the existence of these lacunae, particular events and topics are endowed with what Bhabha refers to as *a privileged visibility* that glosses over the distinct histories and positions of the Diaspora's various sectors as well as their cultural productions. In its cultivation of the illusion of uniqueness or singularity, this superannuated notion of uniformity has largely disconnected itself from an international context as well as from the historical experiences of other diasporic groups, and circumvented a more expansive framework of interpretation in which all discussions of identity, whether national or individual, are located.

Cuba, by nature of its strategic physical location and consequent political and social history, is transnational and multicultural, though the modern concept of nation was not developed until the nineteenth century; and thus Cubans (like most Caribbean peoples, as Stuart Hall points out) possess multiple and sometimes conflicting histories, and inhabit various shifting cultural spaces and perspectives. Beginning with its indigenous population, which was virtually supplanted by a series of colonial presences and substituted by forced and voluntary migrants, Cuba and its cultural manifestations represent a hybrid, transnational integration and fusion of widely diverse cultural roots and influences. Cuba and its history, therefore—including the post-1959 Diaspora—must necessarily be understood in the context of a series of displacements and dislocations.

Anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, in *Cuban Counterpoint, Tobacco and Sugar* and "*Los factores humanos de la cubanidad*," was perhaps the first major figure to introduce the concept of a transnational Cuban identity, as well as explore the attendant theme of transculturation. Since the onset of the exodus that followed in the wake of the 1959 revolution, scholars of Cuban Studies (such as Rubén Rumbaut, Alejandro Portes, Lisandro Pérez, Louis A. Pérez, Miguel González Pando, María Cristina García, Silvia Pedraza, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Ruth Behar, and María de los Angeles Torres) have explored the complex relationships and differences among diasporic Cubans and their offspring. Many consider specifically the manner in which migrancy, and the consequent formation of what contemporary Irish diaspora scholars refer to as a 'third space' identity (which is simultaneously multicultural and multilocational), has informed the process of adaptation and transformation.

The postrevolutionary debate on nation and diaspora gained momentum in the late 1960s; however, a major shift in perspective and understanding occurred in 1990 in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent end of the Cold War. The new ideological trajectory that Cuban diasporic studies would follow was evidenced in two journals: *Postmodern Notes* (1991) and *Encuentro* (Madrid, 1996). There, critics such as Rafael Rojas, Ivan de la Nuez, Enrique Patterson, Alejandro de la Fuente, Lourdes Gil, and others began to question what some refer to as *the grand narrative* of Cuban diasporic discourse by raising provocative questions regarding marginality, hegemony, and legitimacy. In 1994, at a conference in Stockholm, Sweden, scholars

from the Diaspora and the island met and discussed various subjects, including the survival and continuity of Cuban culture; “Con Cuba en la distancia,” an international conference that was launched in the fall of 2001 in Cadíz, Spain, and is offered at regular intervals, takes up similar themes. And the theme of the fall 2003 Cuban Research Institute Conference (which takes place at Florida International University) was “The Nation Transnational.”

A number of individual scholars have more recently begun to rethink Cuba’s cultural and social signification within a larger global context, and thereby entered into a theoretical discussion with other scholars of diaspora, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. Some of the more prominent figures are Rafael Rojas (*El arte de la espera*, 1997; *Isla sin fin*, 1998); Adriana Méndez Rodenas (“Diáspora o identidad: ¿A dónde va la cultura cubana?” 2001); and Ivan de la Nuez (*El mapa de sal*, 2001). The edited collection *Cuba, The Elusive Nation: Interpretations of National Identity* (Damián J. Fernández and Madeline Cámara Betancourt, 2000) features works that primarily comment upon the themes of nationhood and the issue of national identity. However, the focus of this collection tends to be on the island itself, as opposed to the Diaspora. One notable exception is Jorge Duany’s piece “Reconstructing Cubanness: Changing Discourses of National Identity on the Island and in the Diaspora During the Twentieth Century,” in which he addresses the experience of Cuban exiles in a global or transnational framework.

*ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora* (2001, ed. Andrea O’Reilly Herrera), on the other hand, gathers together a diverse sampling of *testimonial expressions* drawn from various Cuban diasporic populations located across the United States. Although it focuses exclusively on Cuban Americans, it nevertheless aims to redress the need for a more inclusive and complex concept of Cuban exile or diasporic identity through its representation of a variety of subject positions, which are informed by a range of factors and determinations including geographical location, race/ethnicity, class, gender, age/generation, and sexual or religious orientation. Ultimately, it aims to explode the correlative myth of authenticity, which determines who can and cannot speak about exile and loss.

Finally, Damián Fernández’s edited collection *Cuba Transnational* (2005) poses as its central argument the idea that Cuba, in spite of its apparent insularity, is deeply influenced by transnational elements and forces, and, in turn, its influence is transnational. While this collection addresses the migration dimension of the exodus following the 1959 revolution, its central concern is the economic, ideational, and cultural exchanges by individuals, organizations, and networks across political and geographic borders. In Fernández’s words, Cuba is *part (actor and subject) of a transnational social space, with material and symbolic exchanges and human networks that link people across time and space.*



Simultaneously building upon *ReMembering Cuba* (as well as my novel *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 2001, and literary anthologies such as Virgil Suárez's and Delia Poey's edited collection *Little Havana Blues*, 1996) and extending and widening the work of scholars such as Ortiz, Fernández, and Cámara Betancourt, *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced* features a wide selection of scholarly essays, testimonials, interviews, and literary works that reflect upon the notion of a displaced transnational nation-space and the nature of identity formation in diaspora. In its interdisciplinary, intersectional, and multi-generic approach, it presents an alternative mode of critical analysis, which formulates a more far-reaching treatment of the manner in which the idea of Cuban nationhood has been constructed, negotiated, and transformed by physical and cultural transmigration. Although the Cuban Diaspora serves as the connective tissue, the collection reveals the nuances, complexities, and the oftentimes antagonistic and contradictory cultural and political debates and positions that coexist within the Cuban exile population. *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced* thus converges with other scholarly projects that aim to formulate critical theories regarding diasporic identity and transnationalism (such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, and cultural studies) at the same time that it expands the discussion of the Diaspora both diachronically in its broad-based global approach, and synchronically in its attention to the interlinked structural differences and imbalances that distinguish diasporic Cubans.

Grounded in the belief that any examination of the inherently transnational and hybrid nature of Cuban culture—with its long history of displacement, migration, and mobility—demands a wider and more varied theoretical and disciplinary framework, *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced* is what one critic has described as a *multi-voiced* text that approaches the subjects of Cuban transnational identity and transculturation by combining strictly theoretical analysis with auto-ethnography and personal and literary reflection. In its conscious avoidance of disciplinary and generic specificity, the works gathered together in this collection simultaneously allow for *contradiction* and *variation* and thereby challenge existing monolithic paradigms and myths regarding Cuban national and diasporic identity.

*Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced* is organized in three related parts, featuring a variety of texts whose thematic concerns and aesthetic approaches complement one another, overlap, and intertwine. All the pieces broadly address the subjects of diasporic identity and cultural transformation within a transnational context, yet each contains its own inflections and employs its own particular analytical, aesthetic, and/or disciplinary perspective. Finally, each chapter is introduced by a poem that underscores the book's overarching themes.

Given the diversity and wide scope of this collection, the works in each part neither are confined to strict thematic categories nor adhere to distinct disciplinary or generic boundaries. Rather, they are intended to create a kind of kaleidoscopic or prismatic coherence that admits both unity and variety and depends on what Stuart Hall (in borrowing from Bakhtin) describes as the *dialogic relation-*

*ship* among varying sets of seemingly oppositional *axes or vectors* (such as similarity and difference; continuity and rupture; resistance and assimilation; preservation and transformation). Though one may argue that I am imposing what some may regard as an *imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation*, the vision of diaspora I am attempting to portray is primarily defined by its heterogeneity, its diversity, and (to borrow Antonio Benítez-Rojo's term) its *poly-rhythmic* nature. In this sense I am in accord with Hall's claim that the complexities of the diasporic experience *exceed* binary models of analysis, for *difference persists alongside continuity*.

Part One, titled "We are Here, There, and Everywhere, A Nation Displaced," concentrates on the physical migration of Cuban exiles to various parts of the world. Adopting a socio-historical analytical perspective, with a sociological and anthropological bent, the works in Part One lend themselves to a comparison of diasporic Cubans who have relocated to Spain; Puerto Rico; Miami, Florida; France; and Venezuela. The first five essays in section one (by authors Mette Louise Berg/Britain, William Navarrete/France, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel/Puerto Rico-United States, María Cristina García/United States, and Holly Ackerman/United States, respectively) specifically take into account the interwoven themes of cultural adaptation, assimilation, and transformation. Most employ an intersectional approach, highlighting interdependent factors and social designations that distinguish these various diasporic populations. Several of these works also draw direct parallels between diasporic Cubans and other diasporic communities or groups, such as the Vietnamese, Mexicans, and Jews.

Part One closes with chapters by sociologist and lawyer Caroline Bettinger-López and anthropologist Lok Chun Debra Siu that focus (respectively) on Jewish and Chinese-Cuban diasporic communities—ethnic/religious subgroups that have been largely overlooked in discussions of the Cuban Diaspora. The final work in this section, co-authored by Susan D. Greenbaum and Linda M. Callejas, discusses race relations between black and white Cubans in Tampa. As Greenbaum and Callejas observe, this particular population of Cubans, who arrived in Tampa in 1886, *were actors in the central drama of Cuban national identity [and] the historical circumstances that gave birth to Cuban ideologies about race and nation*. In addition to shedding light on the relations between these two groups over a long period of time, this piece considers the fundamental differences and similarities between race politics on the island and in the United States from the end of Reconstruction and the consolidation of Jim Crow to the *tandem effects* of the Civil Rights Movement and the Cuban revolution. In sum, these final three chapters represent an attempt to present a more inclusive view of the various categorical differences (such as religious orientation or ethnic/racial background) that inform and differentiate the experiences of Cuban exiles as they undergo the process of adapting to a foreign culture.

Part Two, titled "Identities in Motion," features pieces that propose new theoretical approaches to, and conceptualizations of, Cuba as a transnation, and move

beyond traditional isolationist or *exceptionalist* perspectives or paradigms. In general, these works move the discussion of the Diaspora away from Miami; in the process they aim to create a space for a crosscultural, interdisciplinary, and global dialogue among a new generation of critics, who currently reside in various parts of the world, including Europe, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the United States.

In "Identity and Diaspora: Cuban Culture at the Crossroads," Adriana Méndez Rodenas raises fundamental questions regarding why the dominant narrative in Cuban diasporic studies resists a growing engagement in a broader diasporic framework. Méndez Rodenas frames the Cuban exile in the context of current diasporic theory (developed by scholars such as James Clifford and William Safran), and considers the work of historians such as Rafael Rojas, who focuses upon the debate between national as opposed to diasporic identity. Responding in part to Méndez Rodenas's call to rethink the Cuban Diaspora in more global terms, Jorge Duany adopts a comparative approach in his chapter, "Networks, Remittances, and Family Restaurants: The Cuban Diaspora from a Transnational Perspective." Comparing the Cuban exodus to other diasporas in the Spanish Caribbean, and thus deepening the discussions developed in Part One, he argues compellingly against the concept of Cuban exceptionalism and suggests, rather, that the Cuban exodus has distinct parallels to migrations from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

The remaining chapters in Part Two explore some of the new *identity categories* that have emerged within the Diaspora. In "The Politics of MisReMembering: History, Memory and the Recovery of the *Lost Generation*," Andrea O'Reilly Herrera examines what she has termed the *hierarchies of suffering, authenticity, and legitimacy* that exist within the Cuban Diaspora. More specifically, she sets out to clear a viable theoretical space for those either born or raised outside of the island who claim a Cuban cultural consciousness yet have been largely overlooked or dismissed in the dominant discourses regarding Cuban national identity produced on both sides of the Florida Straits. "In Two or More (Dis)Places: Articulating a Marginal Experience of the Cuban Diaspora," by poet and literary critic Eliana Rivero, employs a semitestimonial narrative form in order to explore the complexities of defining oneself within the context of U.S. identity politics. Diasporic *Cubans-and-others*, Rivero observes, *resist demarcations of unity within any type of limits, at the same time that they recognize a particular legitimacy to being transCubans wherever they might dwell*. Thus, the reconfiguration of identities and communities is played out with variations and thus bears witness to the transformations that Cubans have undergone in the *stretch of their (dis)location journeys*.

The final chapters in this section, Emily Lo's "A Cuban-Chinese *Familia*" and Iraida Iturralde's "In Search of the Palm Tree: An Afternoon with Tania León," are personal accounts that complement parallel meditations in Part One (Lok Chun Debra Siu's "In Search of Chino Latinos in Diaspora" and Susan D. Greenbaum's and Linda M. Callejas's "We All Lived Here Together") and reveal

the struggles of negotiating a transplanted ethnic and/or racial identity. For Lo, exploring the past represents the only way for her to make sense of her complex identity, which is constituted by what she characterizes as seemingly antithetical cultural components. Part Two concludes with an interview (conducted by poet and cultural critic Irida Iturralde) with the classical composer Tania León. Eschewing musical forms that are treated in more traditional Cuban studies venues (such as *salsa*, *son*, jazz-fusion or even hip-hop), Iturralde's piece focuses upon the work of one of Cuba's most renowned diasporic female composers. Among other things, León meditates on the difficulties she has faced being a mixed-race, multiethnic woman seeking entry into what continues to be a primarily white, male-dominated arena, as well as the complex and transnational nature of her cultural heritage, which directly manifests itself in her music.

Exploring the theme of diasporic cultural transformation and production from a variety of nontraditional approaches, Part Three, "The Space between History and Memory: Cultural Transformation in Diaspora," primarily examines the manner in which Cuban artists, writers, cinematographers, and musicians residing around the world have reflected upon the diasporic condition and preserved, perpetuated, and transformed Cuban culture in diaspora. The first four chapters focus upon specific diasporic literary productions. Approaching the themes of history and national identity from a postmodern perspective, Rafael Rojas (in "Diaspora and Memory in Cuban Literature") examines what he terms the *politics of memory* in regard to the manner in which the Cuban exodus is *officially* depicted from a literary perspective on the island, as opposed to the way it is envisioned by those who left Cuba following the 1959 revolution. In addition to providing a finely nuanced and complex view of the manner in which memory changes and adjusts itself over time, Rojas argues that each generation of immigrants arrive in exile with their own particular *set of grievances* and their own *versions* of who is at fault.

Cuban-American literary critic Isabel Alvarez Borland (in "Fertile Multiplicities: Zoé Valdés and the Writers of the '90s Generation") treats the work of novelist Zoé Valdés in the context of the economic crisis in Cuba following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (*el periodo especial*) and the consequent end of the Soviet Bloc. In her piece, Alvarez Borland observes that Valdés's novels depict a distinctly *diasporic poetic*, which is rooted in a Lezamian tradition of writing. Focusing upon Valdés's fiction provides *an alternative cultural discourse* on the subject of diaspora.

The third piece in this series, Claudia Sadowski-Smith's "A Homecoming Without a Home: Recent U.S. Cuban Writing of Diaspora," contextualizes four works written by contemporary Cuban-American authors in the larger theoretical framework of U.S. Border Studies. With specific reference to Asian-American and Chicana/o literary production, Sadowski-Smith focuses her analysis on the recent shift toward a transnational paradigm in U.S. ethnic literature in general, and in Latino/a Studies in particular.

Francisco Soto's "The Dream of Paradise: Homosexuality and Lesbianism in Contemporary Cuban-American Literature," in Part Three, also interrogates the intersections of sexuality, gender, and transnational identity by exploring an eclectic group of contemporary authors who *resist normative and reified notions of sexual identity*. Grounding his essay in a discussion of traditional Cuban attitudes toward homosexuality, Soto argues that authors implementing a variety of generic forms (such as Achy Obejas, Reynaldo Arenas, Magaly Alabau, Pedro Monge Rafuls, and Alina Troyano, to name but a few) have experienced a parallel form of resistance and homophobia from both the Cuban exile community as well as U.S. society at large.

The following piece in Part Three—Andrea O'Reilly Herrera's "Defying Liminality: The Journeys of Cuban Artists in the Diaspora"—discusses the rich integration of widely diverse cultural elements in Cuban diasporic art. With special focus on the ongoing, itinerant exhibition *Café* (which is curated by Leandro Soto and features the work of artists residing primarily in North America), O'Reilly Herrera argues that the work of these particular artists displays a continuity with generations of Cuban artists, yet at the same time is also dynamic and highly original in its absorption and transformation of new elements. This impulse to creatively integrate and transform, O'Reilly Herrera suggests, is partially rooted in the inherently transnational nature of Cuban culture.

Raúl Rubio's "Framing the Cuban Diaspora: Representation and Dialogue in Recent Filmic Productions" addresses the theme of transnational cultural production by focusing on filmic representations of the Cuban Diaspora. Rubio discusses what he refers to as the *utopist and dystopic elements* attached to the myths of nation, and he explores three categories of films and documentaries: those that are produced by non-Cubans, by Cubans residing on the island, and by Cuban exiles and their offspring. Antonio Benítez-Rojo's "Music and Nation," resonant with Iraida Iturralde's interview with Tania León (Part Two), reflects upon the manner in which *Black and Mulata* musical elements have not only contributed to the construction of the 'idea' of the Cuban nation but have had widespread influence on various music forms across the world. An *interplay* of African and European components, Afro-Caribbean music and dance are, in Benítez-Rojo's view, *the most important cultural expressions* that have emerged from the Caribbean; carnival, in turn, provides the most *complete metaphor* through which the Caribbean can be *imagined*. The section concludes with "The Inheritance," a short story by Carlos Victoria. In this haunting account, Victoria (who left Cuba as part of the Mariel boatlift), explores the relationship among displacement, loss, and memory. Relayed through an anonymous dispossessed narrator, who is prompted by a series of photographs to recall his friend's struggle with AIDS, Victoria's story simultaneously speaks to the human condition in the face of mortality while poignantly reenacting the exile's struggle to locate meaning when confronting the prospect of historical obliteration. Although the pho-



tographs purportedly locate and fix the narrator in time and space and thereby secure his place both in the past and in the future, one is left with the notion that identity is inevitably mutable and evanescent.



Although *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced* does not purport to be exhaustive in its focus or scope, the works selected for inclusion in this volume aim to address a host of themes and subjects that have hitherto gone largely unexplored in Cuban diasporic studies. When I first began soliciting for the collection, I anticipated receiving studies that presented a greater range of geographical diasporic locales. In the same vein, I actively sought out works that addressed specific topics such as the transformations of Roman Catholic and/or Santería religious practices in exile, and treated in greater depth subjects such as the adaptation of traditional male and female gender roles and sexual orders in diaspora or the racialization of social categories such as class and gender. I am acutely conscious, therefore, of their absence. Nevertheless, the texts gathered together here offer a rich and novel treatment of the overarching theme of transnational identity, while at the same time problematizing the notion of a displaced nation-space and its attendant hegemonic discourses from multiple and diverse perspectives. In their total effect, they present a complex formulation of Cuban cultural identity and production in diaspora.