

Introduction

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The Chinese horn within Cuban carnival music entails a complex historical mystery: the arrival of the Chinese in Cuba, the cruel exploitation of this ethnic group, the acculturation of the group to the criollo ways of life, its desire for emancipation, and the contributions of the Chinese during the years of the Cuban Republic.

—Antonio Benítez Rojo, “Carnaval de Ideas”

For Antonio Benítez Rojo, the presence of the Chinese horn in Cuban carnival music represents a cultural encounter that offers unique and invaluable information not only about the evolution of Cuban music, but also about the stages of the formation of the Cuban nation. The author of *The Repeating Island* observes that the anomalous presence of the *corneta china* in Cuban music of the nineteenth century speaks at once of the history, economy, and sociology of the Chinese as an ethnic group within the island of Cuba: “What had to occur in order to incorporate the rough and out of tune sound of the Chinese horn into a rhythm which was basically African was the closeness of the Chinese and the African men in the sugar plantations of the last century” (Interview by Stavans 22). The cultural juxtapositions that Antonio Benítez Rojo mentions in his commentary on the *corneta china* are not only applicable to the Cuban nation, but also permeate the sensibility of today’s Cuban-American cultural production wherein diverse ethnic and racial groups (European, African, Asian, Jewish) blend to form a fluid identity traceable to Cuban cultural and societal patterns.

Much like the dissonant sounds of the Chinese horn in the music of Cuban carnival, the narratives and visual representations of U.S. artists and writers of Cuban heritage analyzed in this volume contain within themselves the sometimes disharmonious experience of a divided identity. In fact, the work of the writers and visual artists we analyze here exhibits a sensibility that is highly creative, but which is at times tragic and fractured because it is born from the precarious balance caused by the mixing of two very different cultural tra-

ditions that have coexisted in U.S. territory since the 1959 revolution. Most significantly, these Cuban-American fictions and works of art internalize crucial moments in the history of Cuba's last forty years: dictatorship, exile, and multiple migratory waves.

Because of the ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of the groups who came or were brought to the island, cultural pluralism is a marker of Cuban and Cuban-American identity. Afro-Cubans and Chinese Cubans were two groups that influenced Cuban culture, alongside the immigrants from Spain and other European countries. Cuba also had a significant Jewish population. As these groups met and mixed to differing degrees, their individual and group contributions to Cuban culture were brought to the United States by exiles and immigrants from the island. Since the nineteenth century new arrivals from Cuba continue to change the tenor and meaning of the cultural synthesis that defines *lo cubano-americano*, an ever-shifting concept of identity defined by time, place, class, race, and ethnicity within an American matrix.

Cuban-American writers, poets, and artists thus embody a microcosmic portrait of Cuban and American society in which individual artists choose their expository territory. Within this microcosm, a shift in emphasis provides a shift in meaning in the process of defining or designing that which is Cuban or that which is Cuban-American, or for that matter, that which is American. Recording the meaning of these transformations has been the purview of the writers, poets, and artists studied in this volume. Together, they have given voice to the reality of the thresholds they occupy as Cubans and Americans living within the continuum created by their bicultural identities. At times, the essays in this collection may reflect tension, reconciliation, or even a balance between these markers of identity.

The art and the literature of Cuban America contain the fluidity and elusiveness that characterize the Cuban national quest for identity since the second half of the nineteenth century (Ciani Forza 53). A sense of the metaphysical absence of a nation, and a need to reconceptualize it from within is evident in the intellectual history of the island not only in the nineteenth-century writings of Jose Martí ("Nuestra América," 1891), but also in the twentieth-century treatise of Fernando Ortiz (*Contrapunteo del tabaco y el azúcar*, 1940) and the essays of Jorge Mañach (*Historia y estilo*, 1944). Ortiz, a Cuban ethnologist, was one of the first to truly bring to the forefront the African roots of Cuban culture. His seminal study of Cuban identity coins the word *transculturación* and defines this neologism as a transmutation of cultures that is essential to understanding Cuban culture. Abandoning the more accepted theory of *aculturación*—which for the author implied an imbalance between cultures—Ortiz sees *transculturación* as a slow process that is historical and cultural at once and provides a vision of Cuban culture as a process or as an unfinished synthesis.

Contrapunteo's central thesis sets up a counterpoint between what Ortiz thinks is truly Cuban—tobacco—versus sugar, a crop marked by dependency in

foreign markets, and a symbol of both Spanish and North American interventions. Ortiz's well-known metaphor of Cuban identity as an *ajíaco*, or stew—a term that aptly described the heterogeneity and mix of cultures that defined Cuban identity—became a point of departure for the conceptualization of Cuban identity in exile in the theoretical work of those who followed him. In 1989, two crucial texts informed by the premises of Ortiz's *Contrapunteo* are published in the United States: Antonio Benítez Rojo's *La isla que se repite* (trans. *The Repeating Island*, 1990) and Gustavo Pérez Firmat's *The Cuban Condition*, a work written originally in English.

In *La isla que se repite*, Benítez uncovers a way of conceiving the region that includes folklore, African religions, Caribbean music, and dance creating a multidisciplinary analysis that seeks to explore the entire Caribbean's complex and syncretic culture. For Benítez Rojo, the Caribbean was both plural and chaotic. And if Ortiz had coined the *ajíaco* as his preferred metaphor for Cuban identity, Benítez Rojo's real and metaphoric "archipelago" rounds out this author's conception of what he described as the unique identity and character of the Caribbean region:

The culture of archipelagoes is not terrestrial, as are almost all cultures: it is fluvial and marine. We are dealing here with a culture of bearings, not of routes; of approximations, not of exactitudes. Here the world of straight lines and angles (the wedge, the inclined plane, the intersection) does not dominate; here rules the fluid world of the curving line. (93)

Also drawing from the premises of Fernando Ortiz, albeit from a different generational perspective than Benítez Rojo's, Pérez Firmat's *The Cuban Condition* transposes Ortiz's concepts of "transculturation" to his own exiled generation. In *The Cuban Condition*, Pérez Firmat stresses the imperfection and heterogeneity of Cuban culture. The book examines the period of what has been called a "nation without nationhood" allowing its author to see his own *cubanía* as involving a similar displacement. Observes Pérez Firmat:

While I was writing this book, it often occurred to me that its underlying theme was scriptive survival. My discussions of Fernando Ortiz or Nicolas Guillén or Eugenio Florit or Carlos Loveira are, in a deep sense, inquiries into how these authors survived as writers . . . My desire to demonstrate the centrality of translation in Cuban criollist literature cannot but reflect an attempt to legitimize and place my own work . . . The fate of the Cuban writer, the feat of the Cuban writer, has always been to find himself in others' words. (15)

In his study of Ortiz's works, Pérez Firmat describes the mechanism of translation as an intertextual transculturation process and as a highly sophisticated form of parody. As the author avers, it is through textuality and not scholarship that Ortiz reached for *lo criollo* through the play with imagery. Pérez Firmat sees

his own *cubanía* as involving this kind of displacement and sees Cuban—and U.S. *Cuban literature*—as essentially the product of transculturation, assimilation, and adaptation (translation).

It is thus quite relevant to our collection that *La isla que se repite* and *The Cuban Condition*, central treatises on Cuban identity, were written, not in Cuba, but in exile. More recently, intellectuals exiled from Cuba as a result of the Período Especial (1990–1995) such as Rafael Rojas (*El arte de la espera*, 1998) and Antonio José Ponte (*Por los años de Orígenes*, 2001)—the latter lived in Cuba until 2007, although his works have been published abroad—continue to analyze the elusiveness of Cuban identity and the prevailing theme of a historically absent Cuban nation, a nation promised but never delivered.

As the studies of Benítez Rojo and Pérez Firmat suggest, there is no one true marker of *lo cubano* or *lo cubano-americano*. Instead, there are varying combinations of the European, the Latin American, the African, the Indian, and the Asian identities that created Cuba and subsequently Cuban America. In transforming themselves, Cuban-Americans effect change in mainstream American culture as they become part of its life and its institutions. It is this process of mutual influence that contributes to the American “mosaic,” an immigration paradigm not unlike Ortiz’s Cuban *ajíaco*.

Our collection of essays forms part of a cultural panorama that is larger than any of its parts, yet finds its base in cultural studies concerned with the intersection of personal and ethnic identity. The essays presented in this volume address the idea of cultural pluralism from a variety of perspectives. In some essays, the critic is self-reflective, yet in others, he or she functions as an observer. Throughout these pieces, the goal is to explore the concept of identity or identities through the specific filter of the Cuban and Cuban-American paradigm. The editors of this collection are aware that identity is not a fixed, easily defined concept and the contributors have made the most of this freedom. From diverse perspectives, the essays gathered in this volume explore the relation between memory, exile, immigration, and identity as cultural productions in literature and art. By engaging such issues as hybrid identities, biculturalism, bilingualism, immigration, adaptation, and exile, their contributions offer readers an opportunity to learn about crucial issues pertinent not only to Cuban-American cultural production, but also to other immigrant groups. While these pieces deal in depth with literary and visual texts by contemporary Cuban-American artists and writers, they also explore issues that go beyond the confines of the Cuban-American case.

All of the essays found in this volume agree that the expression of identity is a changing process, yet, there are always recurring themes and concerns. Defining these markers of identity and applying them to the larger group so that the peripheries and the center could be linked is the process that guided the scholarly work of our contributors. Although focused on Cuban and Cuban-American identity, this volume aspires to make an intervention in an area of cultural study that is interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and reflective of diversity.

Thus, we hope that this volume can act as an indexical marker for one American identity that is constantly changing.

The Literature

Cuban-American literature is a field very much in the process of being delineated and discovered as is attested by the number of anthologies and creative works published in the United States in the last two decades. This fertile publishing boom leads us to ponder the relationship of Cuban-American literature in English to that of peer communities of writers publishing in the United States today; namely, that amorphous grouping constituted by other U.S. Latino/Hispanic writers. Given the separate histories and diverse experiences of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban-Americans—to name only the three major groups of writers of Spanish heritage residing in the United States today—it is not surprising to find that each represents quite a distinct literary expression. If asked about personal identity, few Cuban-American writers would identify themselves as Latino or Hispanic writers. The dilemma of labeling these writers as Latinos or Hispanics runs deeper than mere pride of origin (Oboler 1–17). When Latinos or Hispanics look at each other they see Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, and so on.

How Latino or Hispanic is the Cuban-American text? Cuban-American literature seems to be less concerned with issues of political advocacy than its Chicano or Puerto Rican counterparts. These groups write a literature of political engagement, speaking of issues in their lives as minority groups within American society. Compared to the ideological dimension associated with these literatures, the Cuban-American corpus as a whole has not displayed a clearly delineated political stance. Nevertheless Cuban-American male writers have concentrated mainly on issues of self-understanding rather than political activism whereas the fictions and personal writings of Cuban-American women writers such as Cristina García and Achy Obejas, for example, consistently include issues related to minority politics, gender issues, and womens' rights.

As with all ethnic literatures in English, a key issue in the study of these English narratives of Cuban heritage has to do with the English tradition itself and with the interactions between ethnic literatures and American culture. In *A Double Exile*, West Indian scholar Gareth Griffith asserts that writers writing in a language other than their own have two traditions in their background: the poetic tradition of their native countries as well as the tradition of their language of choice. In order to achieve an individual style, the writer must balance the problems of both linguistic traditions (57). According to Griffith: "Ethnic writers can borrow from more than one tradition, and this borrowing itself renews the possibilities of English" (144). The author further points out that any writer who is totally fluent in two languages and two cultures has the potential

to change the perception of the English reality while still remaining in English. Thus when a non-English culture and the English language combine, the possibility to change the perception of reality as experienced by English native speakers occurs: “although the language employed is English, the experience recorded is not, and that new experience may profoundly alter the language and the form employed” (141).

A central concern with the internal and external dimensions of identity unifies a group of literary studies that ranges from traditional treatments of the subject to innovative discussions about identity and its ramifications in U.S. literature of Cuban heritage. Some essays are concerned with the forging of a new identity as reflected thematically in the fiction. In these essays the concept of identity might depend on the relationship between a fictional character and author or between author and reader. Other essays meditate on the fluidity of identity shown in the writing of Cuban-American women and explore their struggle for recognition. Still others, search for the hidden relationships between language and cultural identity. The writers chosen for analysis range from canonical figures to emerging writers, from Cabrera Infante who was one of the first exiles to publish outside Cuba, to figures such as Ana Menéndez now gaining recognition for the significance of her contributions.

Our topics span from examining the literature of identity to exploring the identity of individual texts. The essays by Adriana Méndez Rodenas, Eliana Rivero, and Iraida H. López deal with issues of feminism, gender, and matriarchy. In their panoramic studies both Rivero and Iraida López argue for a fluidity of identity in the writing of women, an identity that is not necessarily easily defined in that it is contextual and always unstable. And while Méndez Rodenas explores the relevance of the mother-daughter bond in the formation of Cuban-American identity, López analyzes the character and essence of personal essays written by Cuban-American women and relates their rhetorical qualities to the genre of the “*manifesto*” or proclamation.

Several studies featured in our volume are devoted to explorations of the work of specific authors. In pieces such “Am I your worst nightmare?” critic Jorge Febles demonstrates how Roberto Fernández’s authority as creator is challenged by his own characters and how investigating the relationship between author and character allows readers to confront or examine their own identities. In some instances authorial identity is of primary concern as when Gustavo Pérez Firmat analyzes his own poetry in “The Spell of the Hyphen” or when William Luis analyzes the photographs that appear in Pérez Firmat’s *Next Year in Cuba*. Finally, Alvarez Borland’s “Figures of Identity” looks at photos and engravings in Cabrera Infante and Ana Menéndez and explores how the continued presence of inner images and texts in their novels invites us to study the photograph as a trope of identity by which the Cuban-American narrative tradition seeks to define itself.

In order to engage such a diversity of topics, the studies included in this treatise adopt distinct critical approaches that range from panoramic vistas of a genre to textual analyses of a specific work. Iraida H. López's incursion into the personal essays of Cuban-American women and Eliana Rivero's overview of the most recent publications by female Cuban-American writers are examples of this approach. These panoramas study a body of writing that began in the late 1970s and due to its changing character needs to be constantly updated and revised. Another approach used by our critics is to study the continuities between authors and texts. The aim here is less to track down sources or influences than to recover the uses to which a given author or text has been put by his or her successors. While some of the critics actually link the works via specific details, others chose to place the works side by side in order to elaborate thematic continuities. For example, Gustavo Pérez Firmat's survey of the poetry of several generations of Cuban-American writers becomes an exercise that allows the author to illustrate the thematics of absence across the generational divide. Alvarez Borland, Pérez Firmat, and Méndez Rodenas juxtapose the writings of a younger generation with that of older, more established writers in order to extricate patterns of writing or the meaning of a trope. By offering such a variety of critical methodologies, these essays explore how the Cuban-American writers think and imagine their community.

Cuban-American literature presents a fascinating challenge to any scholar who would attempt to study images of a concrete "home country" in their narratives. Exile has indeed proven to be a positive experience for the members of the second (and now third) generations as the physical distance from their geography and culture has led these writers to look anew at the values and traditions of Cuban culture. Rather than the usual immigrant back-and-forth journeys to and from the country of origin, for the Cuban-American writer the idea of country is truly an imaginary construct or a country that exists, in the words of Salman Rushdie, "at a slight angle to reality" (*Shame* 22). By incorporating their Cuban selves into their English selves, the writing of these authors becomes enriched and therefore their ability to create magnified.

The Art

The artist is different in that the artist is always able to retain the language of their specific creative impulse, yet the same in that dislocation causes a rupture beyond that language that only repetition, reconstruction and re-examination can begin to mend.

—Marguerite Bouvard, *Landscape and Exile*

It is impossible to reduce the work of Cuban-American artists active in the United States into a uniform group, yet all are joined by their need to explain

how they came to be what they are and their desire to communicate their experience through their work. For Cuban-American artists, visual art gives form to the meaning of their experience, a meaning they construct from their individual perception of exile. Thus, Cuban-American artists have had to continually and continuously redefine their identity as they have sought to uncover their essential self within their split identities as Cubans and Americans.

For each artist, leading a double life has created a need to confront the spiritual implications inherent in the process of defining their identity, reconciling themselves to their fate and present situation, and confronting and resolving the conflicts that their divided lives present. Each artist has responded to this challenge in a different manner. The works of art of Cuban-American artists represent an original, cohesive, and intentional cultural movement within contemporary art. Hence, the work of the Cuban-American artists discussed in this volume should be understood as constituting a significant visual index of the experience of exile.

The essays that follow examine the work of these artists from a variety of perspectives. It is hoped that these studies will draw attention to the contributions the group has made to Cuban and American artistic culture, to twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, and to the universal experience of exile and its aftermath. Each artist discussed in this volume's essays has his or her own memories of the events that propelled their families into exile with the residue of anxiety, fear, and loss that is the result of their experience. The youngest members of the artists discussed here lack these memories, but they remember the stories of incidents told to them by their parents. It is this context that elevates their message beyond a specific and individual statement. Thus, the work of these artists represents a momentary breach in the separation of the self from the self and from the group.

The metamorphosis of trauma into creativity expressed in an artistic medium is not, as was discussed above, unique to Cuban-American artists, as their context places them within the developing cultural production of contemporary global exiles (Bouvard 14). As contemporary artists, Cuban-American artists share in the strong autobiographical element present in the works of the majority of twentieth-century visual artists, writers, and dramatists. It is this inward vision, reflective of personal concerns and experiences, that differentiates modern and contemporary art from the art of previous epochs. Within the personalized sphere of creativity defined by this autobiographical element, artists address their public from the intimacy of their private experiences and individual concerns in order to communicate the universal through the specific. Thus, their cumulative efforts have created a mirror of modern life defined by James Olney as being "intimate and public, psychological and cultural, individual and collective" (28). For Cuban-American artists, the circumstances of their displacement have created a need to, at times, withdraw from their present so that they can commune with their past. In so doing, they live not only "on the hy-

phen" but in a paradox created by the juncture of the competing realities within which they find their creative space. By giving voice to that which they carry within, Cuban-American artists internalize and integrate their psychic shock and emerge as whole and functioning members of the foreign culture to which they now owe allegiance.

The essays on Cuban and Cuban-American art included in this volume analyze the work of the selected Cuban-American artists from a variety of perspectives. Lynette Bosch's "From the Vanguardia to the United States: Cuban and Cuban-American Identity in the Visual Arts" traces the path taken by three distinct groups of artists: the Vanguardia, the post-Vanguardia, and those who arrived from Cuba as a result of the 1959 revolution, including those who arrived as adolescents in the 1960s. Her chapter considers how each group represents diverse ways of negotiating their identity through their visual compositions and the reasons for these changes in artistic expression. Through her exploration, Bosch establishes a paradigm of continuity and difference as a method for understanding the fluidly defined issue of identity and transformation found in Cuban and in Cuban-American art.

Carol Damian's "Cuban Artists and the Irony of Exile" explores the manner in which irony is used by some Cuban-American artists as a vehicle to express the irrationality and existential paradox of the exile condition and the bi-cultural experience. Damian selected a diverse group of artists, some who came to the United States as children or adolescents and those who came as adults in the 1990s in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Through anecdote, symbol, metaphor, and tongue-in-cheek visual play, each artist chosen by Damian explores the paradox of irony as a statement of resolution toward the establishment of a venue for negotiating identity.

Mark Denaci's essay "Challenging Orthodoxies: Cuban-American Art and Postmodernist Criticism" explores the manner in which Cuban-American artists negotiate their interaction in reaction against or acceptance of the American artistic mainstream. Denaci draws from Cuban-born artists who came to this country in the 1960s and 1970s as children and adolescents and from the group which came in the 1990s as adult, mature artists. As Denaci critiques the work of the individual artists he chose from each group, he explores how the definition of identity and its negotiation permeates another type of interaction with artistic identity—that of the modernist or postmodernist artist. The self-reflective attitude of the contemporary artist is taken into consideration by Denaci who seeks to understand the nature of the exchange between the Cuban-American identity and the identities of modernism and postmodernism in the context of the American art market. As Denaci addresses the work of each artist within this structure, he finds that some artists resist the absorption into the mainstream represented by each movement as an act of defiance of assimilation.

Jorge Gracia's chapter touches upon the relationship between philosophy and identity. His consideration of identity addresses the uneasy balance between

essentialism and exceptionalism as he considers how each concept affects the selection and development of individual, group, and national identity. His consideration of how identity is developed through the consumption of food, the study of memory, and the collection of objects, photographs, or works of art, addresses the fundamental question of how to define “*lo cubano*.”

Andrea O'Reilly Herrera's “Cuban Art in the Diaspora” concentrates on a particular group of artists, those who initiated *Café: The Journeys of Cuban Artists*, a multimedia, changing, and traveling exhibition meant to record the experiences of exiled Cuban artists. The goal of this exhibition is the establishment of a mosaic of impressions and artistic statements on how identity is defined, retained, negotiated, and altered in tension and balance. Because the exhibition travels, it forms and reforms itself in a physical manifestation of the geography of multiple identities. In her essay O'Reilly Herrera traces the development of an artistic phenomenon that articulates in visual form the complexity and transformative nature of identity.

Historian Louise Tilly argues for a two-stage process in the study of minority groups: an initial stage with the aim of identifying the contribution to history made by such groups; and, a second stage where their contribution is placed within a larger context of “analytical problem-solving that connects (this microhistory) to general questions already on the intellectual agenda” (441). Scholars who are Cuban-American engaged in the critical study of Cuban-American history, literature, philosophy, theater, art, music, and other aspects of Cuban and Cuban-American culture simultaneously become the examiner and the examined. Thus, the scholarly enterprise becomes a personal exercise in self-knowledge that transmutes the scholarly process into a personal search for information about the past that assists in reconciling that past with the present.

Because the editors—and a majority of the contributors to our collection—belong to the same generation as the Cuban-American artists and writers being studied, this book can be considered part of today's emergent field of ethnic American self-study. This enterprise in self-study challenges the critical distance that usually exists between the scholar and the subject under study. This paradoxical and sometimes even contradictory positioning is not, however, either new or unique to the study of Cuban and Cuban-American subjects by Cuban-American scholars. Yet, there is a difference in the manner in which this process occurs for Cuban-Americans (and others similarly exiled) whose scholarly work is also an attempt to reconstruct and to bridge the gap that is the result of exile. When this process is embarked upon for the purpose of discovering meaning in individual identity, it becomes endowed with an analytical subjectivity that transforms the essence of the scholarly process into a personalized odyssey meant to bring the scholar “home.”

Negotiating identity—national, artistic, and ideological—is a fluid process of ever changing details. The following studies on Cuban-American art and literature point toward a production rich with allusion and recontextualization

that signals the protean nature of the work of these artists who take on or off a variety of cultural garbs. Drawn from a variety of sources and reunited in a unique combination affected by their referent identities, the work of Cuban and Cuban-American writers and artists analyzed in this volume defies both total absorption and total separation from the American mainstream and its didactic modernity. As was the case with our original NEH project, a central goal of this volume is to encourage a dialogue with other current research in Cuban-American art and in literature. Viewed collectively, these scholarly pieces endeavor to create a context for further discussion of the links between Cuban-American contemporary art and Cuban-American literary expression.

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