

Introduction

Looking Back While Forging Ahead

Iraida H. López

In 1988, the anthology *Cuban American Writers: Los Atrevidos* (Cuban American Writers: The Risk-Takers), edited by Carolina Hospital, brought immediate attention to a group of writers for whom English was close to a native language. Having arrived in the United States as children or adolescents, these writers felt quite at ease in their adopted country; at the same time, they had not relinquished their rights to the Spanish language or Cuban culture of their childhood and early adolescence. They were, after all, the sons and daughters of Cuban exiles, whose expectations for a return to their homeland had been kept alive out of sheer will. Writing about Hospital's well-timed anthology, Roberta Fernández stated that the featured writers belonged to a new reality heralding cultural hybridity. Echoing Hospital, Fernández added that such writers, identified as the one-and-a-half generation, could not "be defined simply by their choice of language or their place of birth or residence" (107).

Thirty years later, another group of writers has coalesced to stake a claim to the Cuban American and Latino/a/x literary scene, deepening the cultural ambiguity of the preceding generation. This group includes Richard Blanco, Ana Menéndez, Chantel Acevedo, Jennine Capó Crucet, Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, Derek Palacio, Vanessa Garcia, Robert Arellano, Daniel José Older, Alisa Valdes Rodriguez, Adrian Castro, Gabriela Garcia, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, Carmen Peláez, Alex Segura, and Aja Monet, all of whom have distinguished themselves with their poetry, short stories, plays, essays, and novels. A majority responded to our call for submissions. Sharing many traits with the writers that preceded them, all of these authors amplify some of the known peculiarities while also signaling renewal and transformation. Whereas a few are in the early stages of their writing careers, most have published more than one book and have been the recipients of prestigious fellowships and awards. One among them has been in the limelight more than once. In 2013, Richard Blanco was the fifth poet to read at a US presidential

inauguration and was invited by the Obama administration to recite his poetry at the historic reopening of the US Embassy in Havana in 2015. As a Cuban American, Latino, and openly gay writer, Blanco broke new ground. He was also the youngest of the five inaugural poets in United States history.

Blanco and the other writers are second-generation Cuban Americans. This introduction makes use of the term “generation” strictly as an organizational tool whose intent is to delimit the field of inquiry. The word refers to a cohort or “set of similar-age people moving through the life-course” (Christou and King, 10), at the same time that it also calls to mind a series of key historical events and common experiences (Eckstein, 212, 215). As such, the concept is both biologically and historically grounded. Generational parameters seem right for Cuban migrants who, unlike others from the Caribbean region, fled their homeland in distinct and demographically differentiated waves from 1959 to 1995, after which a more sustained and heterogeneous migration took place, at least until the Trump administration turned back the clock on Cuba policy. By choosing the cohort-based framework as an instrument, the editors do not by any means disavow the dynamic interplay among writers and generations that they, in fact, boldly recognize, at the same time that they uphold the legitimacy of other guiding principles.

What we are calling second-generation Cuban American writers were born between 1960 and the mid-1980s in the United States, of Cuban parents who fled the island after 1959 or have a mixed ethnic background. Although born in Madrid, Blanco came as a small child and grew up in the United States; Cuba, not Spain, figures prominently in his work. Eliana Rivero labeled them “ethnic Cubans” and members of the “Generación Ñ” in 2005 (*Discursos desde la diáspora*, 28–29), but more recently identifies the group as “la segunda generación” (“Leyendo a Cubamérica,” 31–33). In addition, they are considered Latina/o/x writers, fully inserted in ethnically diverse and pan-Latina/o/x surroundings in South Florida and across the United States. However, their bonds with a “Cuba” bequeathed by their ancestors, and sometimes with the actual Cuba, vividly come across in their work. From their present in a multicultural United States, most assert a Cuban/hybrid legacy, handed down through family stories, myths, religious beliefs, a sense of history, photographs, correspondence, keepsakes, soundscapes, and recipes. Representing a relatively new breed of US-born Americans who maintain strong connections with their inherited culture and even their ancestors’ birthplace, these writers are daring in their cultivation of an instinctive, second-nature hybrid identity, reflected in their choice of

subject matter and formal approaches to literature together with their bilingual skills. Most pepper their work, written in English, with words in Cuban Spanish.

Offering a cross section of Cuban American literature that leaves out its antecedents as well as third-generation up-and-coming writers, this anthology aims to affirm the idea of a cohort embodying an extended tradition along with opening up new avenues. The present introduction identifies the distinguishing tropes that define them in relation to earlier Cuban American writers, while arguing for the simultaneous recognition of them as Latina/o/x authors. There is such a thing as Cuban *Latinidad*. Additionally, they are US American writers, for what are Americans in general if not a cultural amalgam, regardless of their professed ethnicity? As risk-taking or *atrevidos* as their trailblazing predecessors, these authors navigate a space where various literary conventions converge. They need not choose one over the other; rather, they juggle them all to achieve a unique mix.

The Homes of Exile

One of the noteworthy features of Cuban migration to the United States over the second half of the twentieth century, the largest exodus in Cuban history, is that it unfolded in separate waves, each with its own social and racial profile. The first wave brought to US shores a number of established Cuban writers disaffected with the 1959 socialist revolution, who joined the nearly 60,600 Cuban-born émigrés living in the United States at the time, mainly in New York (Duany, n.p.). As reluctant exiles, the more recent arrivals pined for the Cuba they had abandoned, suffusing their work with heartfelt nostalgia. At the same time, they were compelled to make sense of their new environment in Miami, where most took up residence. Gradually, the Cuban ethnic enclave of Little Havana, whose origins date from the 1960s, would thrive, thanks not only to entrepreneurship, the quick incorporation of Cuban women into the labor force, and the mutual support that Cuban refugees lent one another, but also to the seemingly warm reception and generous assistance of the US government. Fleeing a Communist regime, the first waves of Cuban migrants, over 90 percent white, benefitted from privileges denied other minorities. The approximately 1.4 million people taking off from Cuba in the years following the revolutionary takeover would critically strengthen the bond between Cuba and Florida that had been established since colonial times (Cantera and Hospital, 1-17) while laying the foundations of a vibrant and viable

Cuban America. Today, approximately two million US residents are natives of Cuba or claim Cuban ancestry (Duany, n.p.).

Despite relative economic prosperity and political acumen that led to identifying them as a “model minority,” homesickness weighed heavily on all Cuban exiles, and writers were no exception. Major authors such as Lydia Cabrera, Enrique Labrador Ruiz, and Lino Novás Calvo, who enjoyed recognition on the island, as well as others, would continue to write in Spanish, a cultural marker that identified them as Cubans in the United States. They, in addition to the oldest among the younger generation, would exhibit what Rivero has dubbed a “discurso de la nostalgia” (nostalgia discourse) that equates prerevolutionary Cuba to paradise lost. Home, for them, was found elsewhere, offshore. This burning, all-consuming absence becomes evident in “An Exile’s Monologue,” a poem by Pura del Prado included in *A Century of Cuban Writers in Florida*. Contrasting Miami and Cuba, the poetic voice laments:

We have trapped the *décima* in disco,
it no longer trots in the field,
the Cathedral Plaza,
it is aimless in the cabaret,
a dead decoration.
Cecilia Valdés sings
that she is a jingle bell and a church bell,
with anguished and nostalgic eyes. (Cantera and Hospital, 153)

Del Prado’s poem—or monologue, which accentuates her loneliness—decries the lack of authenticity of iconic Cuban sounds and sights, such as the *décima*, the Plaza de la Catedral, and even the revered Cecilia Valdés, this side of the Straits, where exiles have artificially reproduced them as in a theme park. For the poet, only what she left behind counts as genuine, and not fake, a perception that brings into stark relief the evolving notion of home among Cuban Americans while also setting in motion the original-versus-copy scheme applied to Havana and Little Havana that has endured over time.

Of course, del Prado wrote in Spanish, as would many writers who carried on such as José Kozler, Reinaldo Arenas, Magali Alabau, Alina Galiano, and Maya Islas. Uva de Aragón, Sonia Rivera Valdés, Daína Chaviano, Orlando González Esteva, and Teresa Dovalpage would pen their works, too, in Spanish, all the while beginning to partake or fully partaking of a more bicultural sensibility. Starting with the nineteenth century’s towering figures of José Martí, Félix Varela, Cirilo Villaverde,

and José María Heredia, there has been a longstanding, but rather silenced tradition among Cuban writers in the United States of retaining Spanish as a means of expression, a sort of stand-in home carved out of language. This surely does not preclude their civic participation as US citizens; it only means that the path to functional integration is sometimes written in a language other than English, a marker of cultural citizenship. Their habit runs parallel to the transition others among their peers make from Spanish into English.

At the Threshold of Hybridity

The next cohort, the so-called one-and-a-half generation, a moniker coined by sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut and made popular by cultural critic Gustavo Pérez Firmat in *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (1994), is composed of the exiles' sons and daughters, who were educated for the most part in the United States. Having left Cuba as children or adolescents, they delve into any and all of the resources the traditions at hand afford them. Such writers of the one-and-a-half generation as Roberto G. Fernández, Pablo Medina, Virgil Suárez, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Carolina Hospital, Nilo Cruz, Eduardo Machado, Carlos Eire, Ricardo Pau-Llosa, Ruth Behar, Rafael Campo, Dolores Prida, Elías Miguel Muñoz, Cristina García, Achy Obejas, Carmelita Tropicana, and H.G. Carrillo—to name a few—some of whom appeared in the 1988 anthology, write primarily in English, but they have published in Spanish as well, in alternating fashion, and occasionally in a mix of both languages. Some choose to abide by the exile tenets while others take on immigrant apprehensions and anxieties similar to a handful of the writers in *Let's Hear Their Voices: Cuban-American Writers of the Second Generation*.

The language of choice is determined not only by the writers' dexterity but similarly by the emotional resonance arising from their first and second languages. Muñoz expressively touches upon the affective implications of language in the voice of the protagonist of his latest novel, *Diary of Fire* (2016): "The narrative was flowing out of me in English, and I wondered why. Maybe I sought a respite from Spanish because it was the language of my folks and my profs and the books I read and taught. Or perhaps I needed distance, the mediation of the Other's tongue to navigate the past and not drown in the memories. Spanish would've been too close to the pain" (50–51). The dilemma can also play out not against, but in favor of Spanish for being closer to the source. At other times, both languages appear side by side, in

a continual code-switching that remains a challenge for monolingual readers. With its Spanish-accented English, its ultimate expression is found in Afro-Cuban American writer H.G. Carrillo's title, *Loosing My EspanGLISH* (2004).

The aforementioned hybridity comes across in other ways. More often than not, the works of these in-between authors are populated by Cuban American characters, yet they may endow their protagonists with other nationalities and ethnic groups. The plot may unfurl in diverse ethnic communities that include other Latinos and Latinas, especially if the writers were raised far from the Cuban enclave in South Miami. Cristina García's novels, for instance, take place in New York, Miami, Havana, and even in unnamed Central American countries, all of these places revealing diverse ethno-racial strands. García's novel, *The Lady Matador's Hotel* (2010), features Latina/o/x and Central American main characters, with Cuban Americans as secondary characters. In Obejas's and Muñoz's novels, too, various nationalities and ethnic groups appear side by side. García, Obejas, and Muñoz were raised far from the Miami-Dade exile community. On the other hand, some of Fernández's best-known novels as well as Pérez Firmat's memoirs, *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America* (1996) are partly or fully immersed in a Miami experiencing birth pangs as it witnessed the vertiginous rise of the institutionally complete ethnic enclave.

All of the one-and-a-half generation writers may or may not share a group identity engineered by common experiences; furthermore, ideologically speaking they are a decidedly mixed lot. However, they are all well aware of the intimate relationship between historical events and lived experience. Extricating the two is nothing short of unimaginable, for what happened in the public domain hit them like a thunderbolt. For the older members of this cohort, the Cuban revolution stands out as a watershed affair that ripped families apart, disrupting many lives and unfurling a before and after, a chasm clearly delineated in some of their narratives.

The one-and-a-half generation writers are mindful of their diasporic condition—a condition that leads them to bow to more than one culture and nationality as a consequence of displacement. It was Lourdes Casal (1938–1981), a distinguished *mulata* writer, social scientist, and activist who forged ties with Cuba, the first to proclaim this newfound bicultural condition in the last lines of her trademark poem “Para Ana Veltfort:” “demasiado habanera para ser neoyorkina, / demasiado neoyorkina para ser, / —aun volver a ser—cualquier otra cosa” (Too habanera to be a New Yorker / too much of a New Yorker to be / —even

to be again—anything else”). Although a few years their senior, Casal had already grasped the earthshaking implications of inhabiting the interstices of definitions.

Others in this cohort have expressed a preference for holding on to the term “exile.” While “diaspora” connotes displacement and longing for an elusive homeland, and “migration” the process of moving to a new place looking for a better life, the word “exile” underscores political opposition. Following Casal, some breached the exiles’ dictum to stay away from Cuba as long as the Castros were in power, shattering the image of a uniformly recalcitrant, uncompromising community. However, the fact that a few were willing to toe the exile line is an indication of both their close alignment to the first wave of Cuban migrants and the primacy of political considerations. Such ethos is aptly reflected in the title of the first full-fledged, valuable study of this in-between literature, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona* (1998), by Isabel Álvarez Borland. The title, which conflates the usually discrete ethnic and exile categories, conveys a desire to hold on to the exilic attribute for Cuban American literature, all the while acknowledging the transition it has irrevocably suffered. The critic’s claim calls for a delicate balancing act, one that some seem to have effectively mastered.

Exilic sentiment has been on the wane with the passage of time, not to mention the arrival, since the 1990s, of tens of thousands of Cuban migrants who exhibit a different set of values and a post-Cold War worldview. These migrants’ relationship with the island was not affected by a long period of separation, enabling the maintenance of ties. This, too, has contributed to undermine political polarization. Whereas there is no question about the shift toward a more moderate political stance, as reflected in the surveys periodically conducted by the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University (FIU), it bears repeating that any cross section of the Cuban community abroad has been and continues to be as diverse as any other from the vantage point of politics and ideology, among others.

Cuban American Literature in the New Millennium

The ten writers represented in *Let’s Hear Their Voices*, Richard Blanco, Ana Menéndez, Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, Adrian Castro, Robert Arellano, Chantel Acevedo, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, Derek Palacio, Vanessa Garcia, and Gabriela Garcia, were born, as stated above, between 1960 and the mid-1980s and have been publishing since the turn of the millennium, with the earliest works appearing around 1997. With

some strong women's voices among them, they exemplify what Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, another second-generation cultural critic and writer of Cuban and Irish heritage, has classified as *Cubands* to throw light on the double consciousness of specifically Cuban Americans like her (179). Furthermore, their works show how exile and diaspora intersect with not only gender, but also race, class, and sexuality.

Cubans abroad, including *Cubands*, profit from multifaceted "enclaves of memory," an expression coined by oral historian Miren Llona to identify the tenacious traces of impressions, reactions, and feelings engraved in one's body. Drawing freely from Llona, we argue that exiled and ethnic Cuban writers extract lessons from time-honored Cuban/Cuban American enclaves of memory comprised of direct and indirect experiences of things Cuban, including narratives and practices emerging from both the private and public arenas. Intertwined with identity motifs and feelings of (un)belonging that have a bearing on bodies, such experiences, narratives, and practices make up the authors' enclaves of memory, a repository connecting the past and the present. Authors across generations tap into a variety of enclaves of memory, not only those of Cuban pedigree, hence the hybridity ingrained in their literature. Equally stressing the importance of reminiscence in émigré communities, "postmemory" is yet another term that has been employed by critics such as Karen S. Christian and Raúl Rosales, to denote comparable processes in Cuban American literature. Launched by Marianne Hirsch to signify the afterlife of memories of the Holocaust in the generations who did not live through the ordeal, the coinage serves to illuminate the undercurrents of the second generation in particular.

Proofs of such lasting connection appear in texts selected for this anthology, such as Richard Blanco's "Cooking with Mamá in Maine," a poem that brings to light the relevance of taste and smell as bodily functions within the enclaves of memory at the same time that it shows how those enclaves irretrievably bleed over time. As much as the poetic voice wants to preserve his mother's Cuban recipes in writing for future reference, he fails time and again as there are measurements that transcend his craving and only she can calibrate them. For the mother, there are no precise measurements to speak of and pass on, only *más o menos* of this or that ingredient. The poetic "I" bemoans the loss, which he fails to prevent. Besides, Robert Arellano's science-fiction story, "Merienda in mérica," depicts an unexpectedly lengthy exile in a planet called Layuma (La Yuma is Cuban slang for the U.S.), where the sole source of comfort is a sketchbook filled with memorabilia, including recipes. This is an album painstakingly put together by none other than the narrator's

Abuela, who remained in the native country, an album which enables the narrator to simultaneously question and rekindle his heritage. Derek Palacio, another of our authors, claims in one of his essays that he “would not be a writer at all if not for [his] father’s memories, those intoxicating ruins” (“The Repeating Cuban”). To enhance the residual heritage, Palacio pursues journeying to Cuba as a way to generate his own memories. If close kin play a crucial role in many of the works, it is because the storehouses of memory are generally passed down through generations.

On the other hand, through his references to a Cuba that, borrowing from Antonio Benítez Rojo, “repeats itself,” Adrian Castro’s poetry demonstrates how the enclaves of memory can lead to other Caribbean islands and to Africa itself, given a common colonial history assembled on the shoulders of slaves. Demonstrating how the wretched past weighs on the present, “boat people” from Cuba and Haiti are driven to another land, “Miami perhaps,” in his poem “Cuchillo de doble filo (I).” In Castro’s case, memory has more of a collective breadth capable of mobilizing people and enlightening the history of colonialism, oppression, and migration that undergirds their actions. While memories are something that call for celebration, they can sometimes feel like a burden, as Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas reminds us in his personal essay “Notes on Returning to San Francisco Twenty-Five Years Later,” on the death toll from the AIDS epidemic. All of these examples show the intricate, shifting, and ever renewable enclaves of memories that are, to be sure, embodied by the writers.

Almost all of these writers have ties to the Cuban ethnic enclave in Miami-Dade County, either because they grew up there or have lived in the area. Acevedo was born in Hialeah. Menéndez and Blanco were born of Cuban parents in Los Angeles and Madrid, respectively, and moved to Tampa and Miami as children, and they are both FIU alumni. Rodríguez Milanés hails from New Jersey and at fourteen came with her family to Miami, where she earned degrees from the University of Miami and Barry University. Of Cuban and Dominican descent, Adrian Castro is a Miami native, as is Cortiñas. And Gabriela Garcia moved to Miami from New York City with her Cuban mother and Mexican father as a toddler, and it was there that she received her primary and secondary education. As noted, multiple-hyphenated identities have begun to proliferate, following New York-based Puerto Rican-Cuban American Piri Thomas: Cuban-Mexican-American, Cuban-Dominican-American, Afro-Cuban-American, Cuban-Irish-American. . . . As evidence that Cuban America transcends the ethnic enclave, Derek Palacio was born in Evanston,

Illinois, and grew up in Greenland, New Hampshire; and Robert Arellano is from Summit, New Jersey.

Though not always, the Cuban American community in South Florida anchors the stories these writers tell, more so than in the literature of the one-and-a-half generation. *The Prince of Los Cocuyos* (2014), Richard Blanco's memoirs of growing up in Westchester, and some of the poems that compose his *City of a Hundred Fires* (1998), corroborate our assertion. This holds true, in part, in "The Death of Lenin García," a novel in progress by Ana Menéndez. The search for an answer to Lenin García's suicide leads the main character to his South Beach neighbors, all of whom are immigrants from Cuba and elsewhere who had come in contact with the deceased. Each bares a piece of his soul before the questioner and offers a glimpse into Lenin's life. This narrative device lends a multivocal lyricism to the rich ethnic canvas outgrowing the Cuban enclave and unfolding in Miami. Included here is an excerpt highlighting the transformation of South Miami from a heaven for retirees to a bustling beach town, with the attendant repercussions for community cohesiveness and the quality of life. Moreover, the short story collection *In Cuba I was a German Shepherd* (2001) and the novel *Loving Che* (2003), by the same author; *White Light* (2015) by Vanessa Garcia; and the excerpt from Cortiñas's play *Bird in the Hand* appearing in the anthology also have Miami and its environs as a backdrop. Robert Arellano adds a twist to this pattern by bringing a Cuban doctor-turned-spy into a Miami terrorist network in his recently published noir novel, *Havana Libre* (2017).

In most of these works, Miami is the city where characters wrestle with whatever challenges they face as the descendants of immigrants whose roots are firmly planted in two nations at once, at least culturally. A sympathetic view of the early exiles, founders of Little Havana, sometimes transpires as they try to adjust to a new, bewildering landscape while waiting for news of their loved ones in Cuba, as in Blanco's "Mail for Mamá." A stone's throw away from Cuba, so to speak, Miami is the place that enables a "Cuban American" identity, mostly white, through the widespread use of the Spanish language or creole Spanglish. In conjunction with its media outlets, many of its culinary and musical offerings abet the same kind of hybrid identity.

Conversely, Miami can be an incongruous place, one which some of the characters wish to flee. This may be due to the stubbornness of the Cuban American population, as profiled in the literature, to cling to the old ways, resisting change in the spheres of patriarchy and family relations, at times overwhelming, almost smothering, in the demands it

makes, and lacking tolerance toward non-normative sexuality, traits that earlier writers such as Achy Obejas and Elías Miguel Muñoz had already condemned in their works. Narrow-mindedness is no doubt exposed for what it is in Blanco's *The Prince of Los Cocuyos*, in the form of Abuela's relentless attempts to root out any deviations, no matter how slight or harmless, from sexual and gender norms. The excerpt we have chosen, on homoerotic desire, shows how futile those attempts ultimately prove to be.

Alternatively, the uneasiness may emerge out of the implicit rejection of exile politics, so often negatively imbued with passion, polarization, and prejudice. Acevedo's story in this anthology, "The Child Hero's Lament," illustrates the strained relationship between a Cuban father and his Cuban American daughter in the face of the Elián González's incident. It is ironic that despite the father's unconditional love for his daughter, he is adamantly opposed to the return of Elián to his own father across the Straits. There is no resolution for confrontations of this ilk. Cortiñas's excerpt "Bird in the Hand," although not built on confrontation, nods to the generational gap through a whimsical performance whose M.C. happens to be the son of a Miami theme park's Cuban owner, an exile. With tourists as a captive audience, the young Cuban American has no qualms about exposing the bizarre behavior of the park's main attraction, a flock of pink flamingos that, having been brought in from Cuba, are utterly unhappy with their fate. As these references show, Miami may be a magnet for Cuban Americans, as it is for countless non-Cuban immigrants from Latin America who have made the city their home, transforming it into a Latino/a/x mecca, yet there is a sense of ambivalence about it, and especially its denizens, in many of the works where they play a part.

Some of the authors have a preference for supplementary settings. Ana Menéndez's novel *The Last War* (2009) takes place in the Middle East, and Acevedo's *The Living Infinite* (2017) in Spain and the United States, in addition to Cuba. The family that left Cuba during the Mariel boatlift in 1980 in Derek Palacio's *The Mortifications* (2016) bypasses Miami to set up house farther north, in Hartford, Connecticut. On the other hand, Vanessa Garcia's *White Light* (2015), though taking place in Miami among Cuban Americans and other Latinos, does not fret about ethnic identity, which is simply naturally assumed. These writers do not check off a census box as a prerequisite to creating literature.

At the opposite end, there are those who look toward Cuba as a mother lode of inspiration. For the one-and-a-half generation Cuba was a primary point of reference, and writers of this generation return

to Cuba time and again through their memoirs and fiction writing even if they are of two minds about the island. They do so with an obstinacy that turns returning, both in its physical and metaphorical modes, into a subject worthy of scrutiny, as Iraida H. López has shown in *Impossible Returns: Narratives of the Cuban Diaspora* (2015). Because they were spirited out of Cuba as children and adolescents, their yearning to return to a forbidden land is understandable. Harder to understand is Cuba's allure among second-generation authors. Yet some among these feel a deep loyalty that induces them to "return" to Cuba and even to "go home for the first time," as Monica Castillo, a Cuban American film critic, puts it. An American-born Cuban, Castillo adds that she grew up *with* Cuba, although not *in* Cuba. The emotional attachments that in part explain the fascination are the object of Richard Blanco's reflection in an NPR interview aired February 18, 2013:

I always claim that my soul is Cuban, my soul was made in Cuba, and I was assembled in Spain and then imported to the United States. . . . The first time I went back to Cuba . . . it does feel literally like you're going back because there's so much—you grow up with so much family lore, so many photographs and stories and things like that, that you feel like you have been there in some way, emotionally. So when you do go, it does feel like a going back. ("I Finally Felt Like I Was Home")

In the same vein, upon visiting Cuba for the first time, Vanessa Garcia recognized a "Havana that existed before I ever saw it for myself—in my bones, my collective unconscious, my DNA" ("My Family Fled Cuba"). Garcia speaks of Havana as the "original" that inspired the "carbon copy" that is Miami ("Breaking the Family Embargo"), as the exiled poet Pura del Prado did before her. After spending their entire lives listening to stories about Cuba in both the private and public domains, it is no wonder that some might consider their imagined Cuba a home, albeit mediated by a loaded and ever-present history that is partly their own through personal and collective enclaves of memory. Part of it rests in transnational and deterritorialized imaginaries that have been on the rise for decades, but that Cubans have experienced in full force only recently due to the long-lasting political divide. Garcia's story in this collection, "This Is Not a Neon Sign," takes place in Cuba shortly after a new US president takes over in 2017. The narrator/protagonist lands with a mission: to put it all together, to make sense of who she is, to explain why all roads (in this case, boats) lead to Cuba. Despite having been born in the United States, she is as drawn to the island as her

fifty-year-old *marielita* friend, a queer architect who has just repatriated but nonetheless splits her time between Havana and Miami, carrying with her a unique mixed baggage made up of pieces from both ends. As the young woman remarks, “[E]very bit of me is from here and not from here. I’m a Miami Cuban.” And sometimes the line between adjectives of nationality blurs, as in “Americuban,” Blanco’s neologism in *Matters of the Sea / Cosas del mar* (2015), against the grain of longstanding tensions between Americans and Cubans.

Additionally, some of Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés’s narratives, such as “Cienfuegos, Pearl of the South,” an excerpt from a novel in progress included here, evoke an engrossing time period in Cuba. This particular piece brings the contracted distance between the two shores into focus. The tragedy that befalls the protagonists, Gisela and Beto, in Guanabacoa and Cienfuegos one day in 1957 as the Batista forces faced the revolutionary militia, which are narrated in the first section, are followed by Gisela’s vivid memories about the aftereffects of that fateful day. She has not been able to shake them off despite the years that she and her family have been in exile. “To keep revisiting the past,” Gisela admits, is how exiles remember. Dwelling, too, on the prerevolutionary past, Derek Palacio’s “Home to Our Blood” zooms in on a day in the life of an American doctor who finds herself in Isla de Pinos. She is in the company of friends who supported the underground movement against the Batista dictatorship. While separations, betrayals, and executions are raging, she is there to assist her Cuban friend, who has decided to put an end to her pregnancy. Appropriately enough, at a time of upheaval in Cuba bloodshed is anything but in short supply.

The back and forth movement is likewise interwoven in previously published work by the writers involved in our project. Chantel Acevedo’s novel, *A Falling Star* (2013), moves between Cuba and Miami in a contrapuntal fashion that recalls earlier publications by the one-and-a-half generation. Menéndez’s *Loving Che* (2003), whose protagonist goes to Cuba in search of her putative father, Ernesto Guevara, after receiving an enigmatic parcel in the mail exemplifies this trend, as well as Palacio’s *The Mortifications* (2016), a family saga straddling both the island and the mainland. Blanco’s poetry collection, *City of a Hundred Fires* (1998), introduces Little Havana as often as Havana, in addition to other places on the island, his familiarity with the latter sites the outcome of his first trip to Cuba. The collection’s title itself remits the reader to the Cuban city of Cienfuegos. The suspenseful plot in Arellano’s novels *Havana Lunar* (2009) and *Havana Libre* (2017) evolves for the most part in an unforgiving Havana where idealists seeking to do good are still found.

These writers have crossed the Florida Straits in search of motivation and meaning, further justifying the labeling of Cubans in the United States as a diaspora, a dispersal that has taken tens of thousands of Cuban nationals across the globe.

When Cuba or the Cuban community in Miami makes its way into second-generation Cuban American literature, exile politics play a much lesser role, if any. There are no longer young characters who single-mindedly take sides regarding Cuba. On the contrary, they tend to be critical of their ancestors for putting politics ahead of family relations, active ties with the motherland, forbearance toward more recent arrivals, or simply the pressures of day-to-day life. Exile politics are contemplated through a critical lens. While this is far from a novel perspective given, say, the unsympathetic account of exiled characters from the vantage point of a daughter of exiles in a novel such as García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1994), second-generation writers sharpen the distance. These writers go beyond Cold War, anti-Castro rhetoric, acquiring more of an immigrant stance in their search for a more judicious and nuanced approach to Cuban America.

To mention but one example, author Rodríguez Milanés has chosen to focus on intra-ethnic conflicts in some of her short stories, showing how *marielitos* (arriving in the mainland United States in 1980) and *balseros* (entering in 1994) alike have been mistreated by the earlier waves of Cuban exiles, who deemed them too dark, uneducated, and ideologically suspect. Being more representative of Cuba's racial make-up, the more recent refugees were nevertheless to be kept at arm's length despite the dazzling talent in their ranks, as Reinaldo Arenas and others have soundly proven. This portrayal raises questions about social class and racial discrimination within a community that sees itself as deserving of white privilege given its exilic origins. Racial bigotry in, and also outside, the community is reflected in subtle but incisive ways in the work of emerging writers, ready to interrogate and renegotiate what "has been culturally transmitted throughout the years about Mariel" and what it stands for as a signifier, as Rosales reminds us (56).

Adrian Castro's poetry turns that assumed whiteness on its head by going beyond its surface to account for the pervasive influence of African-derived music, art, and popular religion in Cuban and Caribbean culture. A singular voice in Cuban American literature, Castro draws from a range of sources to construct poems frequented by the likes of Shangó, Yemayá, Mongo Santamaría, Nicolás Guillén, Luis Palés Matos, Mario Bauzá, Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodríguez, to name a few, whose cues he follows to capture a performative cross rhythm. A

“Latin Jazz musician of Language,” Víctor Hernández Cruz calls him in the preface to *Cantos to Blood & Honey* (1997), in which he praises Castro’s ability to synthesize legacies, dialects, and modes of expression conveying a layered view of history.

A related issue is the underprivileged background of some of the characters, whose trials and tribulations steer them away from politics as an obsession. Anxious about survival, these characters appear in settings such as Hialeah, in Miami-Dade County, and Union City, in New Jersey’s Hudson County, cities where working-class Cuban Americans live side by side. Gabriela Garcia’s engaging short story, “Other Leticia,” appearing in this volume, revolves around an eight-year-old girl and her blue-collar parents, who can barely make ends meet. At school, students shun the child because of her social circumstances: her Spanish-speaking parents live in a Homestead trailer house after having fled Cuba on a makeshift raft, a treacherous journey that casts a long shadow over their lives. Just before Hurricane Andrew is about to make landfall in Florida, the storm brewing outside is as devastating as the one taking shape inside the home. And the day the hurricane strikes, their world comes to an end. This type of narrative, of which there are prior examples in H.G. Carrillo’s and Elías Miguel Muñoz’s fiction, for instance, offers a multileveled approach to Cuban exiles, not always or no longer specimens of a successful, model minority not bearing the brunt of difference and exclusion.

Women take center stage in many of the narratives. The majority of the writers of this generation are women, and they address an array of topics touching on the female experience such as intimate relationships, the need for self-definition, self-worth, and self-reliance, and the struggles to get ahead in a patriarchal and racist society. Cuban-American literature used to be a field largely dominated by male writers, but that is no longer the case. This is a welcome development, as an even stronger female voice was sorely needed to further expose how patriarchal and epistemic violence affect the gendered body, romantic relationships, and even the sexual act, as Laura P. Alonso Gallo has written with regards to Menéndez, Vanessa Garcia, and Capó Crucet. These women authors have joined the ranks of Latina writers and collaborate with others as peers. Case in point, the timely volume edited by Jennifer De Leon, *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (2014), about the challenges Latinas have encountered on their way to achievement and personal satisfaction contains essays by Acevedo and Rodríguez Milanés, among others of Cuban descent. Alongside other Latinas, they write eloquently about the compromises that they have reached to balance family and professional life and still get ahead in the United States, their native land.

Their interests similarly intersect with those of colleagues of the earlier generation such as Cristina García and Achy Obejas, whose feminist drive put them at odds with mainstream Cuban America. The Infanta Eulalia, the protagonist of Acevedo's historical novel *The Living Infinite* (2017), strives to ascertain her independence during her visit to Cuba at the height of the war against Spanish colonial oppression with as much zest as Blanca Mestre, the nonconformist biologist whose wings were tragically clipped not long after the American intervention in Cuba, which ended that same war in Cristina García's *The Agüero Sisters* (1997). A feminist mindset crisscrosses all of these works, but the current concentration of women writers broadens the playing field. Feminist transactions continue to be at the forefront among third-generation Cuban American writers, as Carmen Maria Machado evinces in her acclaimed first collection of short stories, *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017), finalist, like Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, for the National Book Award. The book is dedicated to Machado's Cuban *abuelo*.

In sum, the indisputable value of the enclaves of memory, the weight accorded to the ethnic enclave, Cuba, and other sites as sources of inspiration and identification, the pointed attitude toward the Cuban American community's idiosyncrasy, a concern with gender, sexuality, and race as sites of contention, and the authority of the female gaze cover some of the developments currently defining present Cuban American literature. Rather than a departure, though, these features constitute variations within Cuban American literature, with some of the writers' themes and approaches to the craft of writing overlapping with those of the previous cohort.

Beyond the Binary: Cuban Latinidad

Notwithstanding the authors' conceivable interest in Cuban matters, it is important not to lose sight of their linkages to the larger field of Latina/o/x literature. In her recent essay on the marginalization of Cuban American literature in critical approaches to the Latina/o/x literary corpus, Christian argues that the emphasis on conservative politics and the historical trajectory of the Cuban community in the United States has obscured the commonalities between Cuban American literature and other Latino/a/x narratives. Aside from a handful of Cuban American writers considered in the critical works, the rest have been virtually erased. Feeding off an entrenched paradigm, the perception is that the two literatures all but share a common ground.

We posit that an epistemological shift is in order. There is evidence

about the fruitful collaboration and dialogue that took place among Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Afro-American writers since an early time, as Bernardo Vega and others intimate in their memoirs about life in Hispanic immigrant communities in New York in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another renowned writer and journalist, Afro-Puerto Rican Jesús Colón, actively participated in such organizations as El Club Mella and El Club Cubano Inter-Americano in the 1930s and 1940s, where he helped create links with El Club Borinquen and the Sociedad Fraternal Ramón Emeterio Betances, among others (Mirabal 199). These clubs catered to other Hispanics as well, as Colón recognizes in the following entry on the Cervantes Fraternal Society, with which El Club Mella was affiliated: “We are a society of various nationalities. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, Spaniards and Cubans; all the multiple types of colorful humanity from the Río Grande to Patagonia” (Mirabal 172). In the early 1980s, Puerto Rican scholars such as Efraín Barradas and Yanis Gordils were instrumental in making *Areíto*, founded by young Cuban Americans, the relevant journal it became among the New York Latino progressive community. With growing numbers of Latinas/os/xs across the land and the rise of a pan-Latino/a/x identity with deep roots in the United States that dialogue, if anything, has intensified rather than weakened.

Today’s Cuban American texts continue to shape and be shaped by important aspects of *Latinidad*. According to Christian, one of the common traits in Latino/a/x literature is the intertwining of “historical forces and personal history” (282), constituent of novels such as Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Julia Álvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), and Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* (2002). Separating the private from the public in these three accounts is, as in many Cuban American texts, filled with difficulties. Works by Latina/o/x writers also share a preoccupation with a number of additional themes: the construction and performance of identity, homing instincts and the longing for home, ongoing transnational ties, revisionist positions regarding individual and collective narratives, the resilience of memory and the dismantling of family secrets, power and politics, the intersection of culture, gender, race, and sexuality, and the politics of language (Christian 283). Moreover, placing race in center stage, critic Antonio López demonstrates how Afro-Cuban American writers cohabit the space of *afrolatinidad* next to others of African descent who experience “the social difference that blackness makes in the United States” (4) not only with respect to the Anglo majority but also vis-à-vis other Cuban Americans who may cringe at the thought of a racially diverse Cuban

America empowered across the board. Recognized by Christian and A. López as paramount areas of exploration in Latina/o/x works, these are in fact some of the points that have been stressed in this introduction as regards Cuban American writing. Cuban *Latinidad* overlaps with the Latino/a/x playbook at the same time that it retains its specificity.

Like their Latina/o/x counterparts, these Cuban American writers employ almost exclusively standard English, oftentimes combined with an array of innovations such as code switching, linguistic borrowings, and literal translations from the Spanish. Both the English and Spanish languages are transformed by their contact with an/Other tongue, leaving a noticeable trace that is one of its most distinguishing and exciting characteristics. In *Let's Hear Their Voices*, we have adhered to the conventional spelling of Spanish words whenever they appear in the texts themselves while being respectful of the unconventional lack of accent marks in some of the authors' patronymics, a sign of their ontological location. Likewise, at least one of the writers chose not to italicize Spanish words, arguing that both her languages form a seamless whole. We went along with this decision as well.



As editors of the present volume, it is our hope that this introduction and, more important, the contributions of the authors themselves will draw attention to Cuban American creative writers who have emerged in the last two decades. We aspire just as much to help to further elucidate the place that they occupy in the richly textured tapestries of Cuban American and Latina/o/x literatures. After having organized a roundtable at the 2017 Cuban Research Institute Conference and a reading at the Coral Gables Books & Books showcasing some of these writers, the editors felt it was time to gather their collective voice in a single volume to celebrate the coming of age of a literature poised to leave its imprint in fiction, memoir, poetry, essay, and drama, samples of which readers will find herein.