

CUBAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE: Critical Junctures

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A PLACE IN THE SUN? WOMEN WRITERS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CUBA.

By Catherine Davies. (London: Zed, 1997, distributed by St. Martin's.
Pp. 247. \$65.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper.)

*CUBAN WRITERS ON AND OFF THE ISLAND: CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVE
FICTION.* By Pamela Maria Smorkaloff. (New York: Twayne Publishers,
1999. Pp. 104. \$32.00 cloth.)

AFRO-CUBAN LITERATURE: CRITICAL JUNCTURES. By Edward J. Mullen
(Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1998. Pp. 238. \$55.00 cloth.)

MY OWN PRIVATE CUBA: ESSAYS ON CUBAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE. By
Gustavo Pérez Firmat. (Boulder, Colo.: Society of Spanish and Spanish-
American Studies, 1999. Pp. 251. \$25.00 paper.)

The last seven years have manifested an increasing interest in all things Cuban. Cuba has become the focus of the general public as well as scholars and translators. One can scarcely open any kind of review without finding essays on Cuba. The popular amazon.com website lists nearly three thousand titles under Cuba. Cuban music in particular dominates various works, leaving the impression that world markets are thirsty for works by or about Cubans.

Some observers think that this passionate interest resulted from Wim Wenders's 1999 film, *The Buena Vista Social Club*. Others, particularly academicians, have discussed the reawakening of interest in Cuban literature resulting from growing awareness of the universality of the Caribbean, stimulated by the works of writers like Antonio Benítez Rojo and Edouard Glissant. And the debate goes on. Aware of the many ingredients that make up this debate, I will leave the Cuban stew simmering to discuss four remarkable books that will facilitate a better understanding of everything Cuban.

Cuban Women Writers

Catherine Davies's *A Place in the Sun? Women Writers in Twentieth-Century Cuba* is to be commended for reformulating the traditional literary

debate that usually keeps women at the margins of national discourses. A well-known specialist in Cuban literature at the University of Manchester, Davies has published many essays on Cuban women writers. *A Place in the Sun* combines documentation with in-depth observations to reveal the plurality of Cuban women's voices and present a well-elaborated theoretical discussion of debates about representation.

Using feminist scholarship to deconstruct androcentric cultural paradigms, Davies discusses how Cuban culture and history throughout the twentieth century was constructed by discourses of "modernity, as understood by Peter Osborne as a 'culture of time,' a distinctive way of temporalizing historical time informed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophy with a political agenda" (p. 5). The Cuban Revolution of 1959 did not mark a break from the totalizing and homogenizing concepts of modernity, keeping dominant versions of religion, racial and national identity, private and public space, and gender and sexuality as well as political regime (p. 8). Contrary to some critics' comments and in spite of many accomplishments by women, patriarchy in Cuba has not been dismantled. As Ruth Behar observed recently, "In Cuba, feminism lives and breathes in the shadow of its great male heroes" (1998, x).

Participating in a plurality of discourses that contest the ideological and cultural hegemony of the governing elites, women always have played an important role in constructing a collective Cuban identity. Davies offers a well-documented retrospective of the presence of women writers on the Cuban cultural map, thus contextualizing the work of the writers studied. For example, before assessing the women writers of neocolonial Cuba (1900 to 1959), Davies establishes essential links to two precursors: María Mercedes de Santa Cruz y Montalvo, known as the Countess of Merlin (1789–1832), and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814–1873).

In *A Place in the Sun*, Davies shows how Cuban women voiced their discontent and asserted their differences through writing by discussing the literary production of writers such as Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta, Mariblanca Sabás Alomá, Nieves Xenes, Dulce María Borrero, Emilia Bernal, Dulce María Loynaz, and María Luisa Milanés. Literary essays, novels, and poems all have served to assert women's differences "in the fraught context of a dependent, postcolonial country undergoing rapid modernization" (p. 64). Although some women writers developed a revolutionary consciousness that forged connections among Cubanism, feminism, class politics, and anti-racism, Davies observes how Cuban women poets in particular created several textual strategies to subvert traditional myths of femininity (the Mother and the Domestic Bliss). In "refocusing" the female body and sexuality from a feminine perspective and undermining existing myths of "dominant masculinity" through irony, ridicule, and humor, "this kind of women's writing is perhaps the most radical as it involves the writer turning private subjectivity into the source of a collective, liberating

discourse; it involves socializing the unconscious and the inner self" (p. 40). Exploring further the idea that a woman's text can be subversive without having a direct discourse of rebellion, Davies analyzes in depth the works of María Luisa Loynaz and Fina García Marruz.

Davies also extends the chronological perspective of women writers in postrevolutionary Cuba by discussing their literary production from 1959 to 1992. The genre in which Cuban women keep excelling after 1959 is poetry. From 1959 to the 1980s, more books of poetry were published than either collections of short stories or novels. A few well-known Cuban playwrights are also mentioned in these pages: Ingrid González, Gloria Parrado, Flora Lauten, and Xiomara Leyva Ojito.

Like poetry, the short story has always been a popular genre among Cuban writers and readers. More than twenty collections of short stories were published by women in Cuba between 1959 and 1986. Additional collections became popular after the 1990s, particularly Mirta Yáñez's *Estatuas de sal: Cuentistas cubanas contemporáneas*, published by Ediciones Unión in 1996.

In 1988 Cuban critic Luisa Campuzano published "Women in the Narrative of the Revolution: An Essay on Scarcity" (in Yáñez and Bobes 1996), a seminal essay that presented remarkable statistics: only 12 novels were published by women in Cuba between 1959 and 1983, compared with 170 novels by men. Contrary to what happened in the period covered by *A Place in the Sun*, the 1990s witnessed a kind of boom in novels written by Cuban women, which are attracting growing attention from readers and critics.

The mid-1990s represented an important period in the quality and quantity of works published. Certain women writers enjoyed great editorial success. One was Zoe Valdés with her "erotic-dirty realist-testimonial" novels like *La nada cotidiana* (1995, translated in 1997 as *Yocandra in the Paradise of Nada*), *Te di la vida entera* (1996), and *Sangre Azul* (1996). Two women writers now being recognized for the high quality of their writings are Daína Chaviano, with *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* (1998) and Ena Lucía Portela, with *El pájaro: Pincel y tinta china* (1999). The trajectory of these writers can be traced in Davies's study. Valdés and Chaviano began their literary careers in Cuba and had already published work before they went to live abroad in the 1990s (in Paris and Miami, respectively). Portela lives in Cuba and has become an internationally known writer after the publication of her novel. Other nonresident Cuban women writers who have won recognition for their novels are Julieta Campos (Mexico), Nivaria Tejera (France), and Mayra Montero (Puerto Rico).

In spite of the quantity and high quality of the poetry written by Cuban women, few books have analyzed this body of work (Barquet 1995, 11). Davies recognizes this void. Without abandoning the study of novels and short stories, she pays more attention to poetry throughout *A Place in the Sun*. Two intriguing chapters are dedicated to poetry since 1959. Chapter

7 discusses the presence of Africa in the poetry of Nancy Morejón, Georgina Herrera, and Excilia Saldaña. It occasions a rethinking of some of the most discussed theories about race and the construction of Cuban identity: the Cuban nation as Afro Spanish (Guillén 1930), the concept of a national Cuban identity as “whiteblack” (Ortiz 1961), and the questioning of Cuba’s national ideology of *mestizaje*, with the Cuban mulatta as its most prevalent emblem (Kutzinski 1993). Identity politics has not been a burning issue in Cuba, and generally speaking, black writers have shown little interest in exclusively black themes (Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs 1993). In contrast, white women (such as Minerva Salado) have made use of African themes and at times created a black persona (Davies, p. 141).

Davies’s discussion of female erotic desire in Cuban women’s poetry is particularly significant (chapter 8). Nor was erotic poetry well accepted in the first decades following the Cuban Revolution, despite important women’s voices in Cuban literature like Mercedes Matamoros (1851–1906) and Carilda Oliver Labra (1922–). Erotic women’s literature was not welcome during the 1960s and 1970s in Cuba. Not until the mid-1980s were the erotic poems of Oliver Labra republished in Cuba, promoted by women poets themselves, especially the younger ones. Poets born after the 1950s have written a liberated type of discourse that “opened fissures” in Cuban revolutionary ideology: the frank poetry of Chely Lima and Zoe Valdés, the metaphorical poetry of Soledad Cruz Guerra, and the lyrical and ludic poetry of Reina María Rodríguez. Two of the best exponents of black and mulatto women’s erotic poetry are Nancy Morejón, who presents lesbian love, and Excilia Saldaña, who explores the rejection-recuperation of the mulatto female body. By inventing new spaces and asking different questions, women writers have not only questioned the discourses of the nation but left a significant imprint on Cuban culture and society. The three-page “final comment” that Davies adds as a sort of colophon for *A Place in the Sun* provides a necessary overview of the many changes occurring in Cuban literature since the 1990s at the international level: the forging of bridges between Cuban women writers in Cuba and outside Cuba; joint publishing ventures that are facilitating publication of Cuban authors in other countries; and the success of Cuban women writers around the world.

Cuban Literary Dialogue: Canon and Diaspora

A pioneering work in presenting transnational and interdisciplinary texts was *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba* (1994), edited by Ruth Behar and Juan León. The anthology sought to stimulate an open dialogue with Cuba and its artists and writers on the island and beyond. Another anthology that promoted Cuban writing was *Cuba, la isla posible* (1995), published in Barcelona and edited by Juan Pablo Ballester, María Elena Escalona, and Iván de la Nuez. This anthology proposed more tolerance and understanding of

Cuban artistic production outside the island and characterized “extraterritorial Cuban culture as a multicultural and cosmopolitan body of writing that claims recognition outside Cuba” (Alvarez Borland 1998, 52). A third anthology published in 1995 in Mexico under the title *Más allá de la isla* presented a diverse body of texts by Cuban writers in exile. Edited by Jesús J. Barquet, this collection claimed that Cuban culture is a single entity, defending the idea of Cuban cultural continuity beyond the island of Cuba: Cuban literature as no longer confined by space, ideology, or language.

Joining the publications that approach Cuban literature from an open perspective as a multicultural and cosmopolitan body of writing is Pamela Maria Smorkaloff’s *Cuban Writers on and off the Island*. Her book breaks with all absolutes and situates Cuban and Cuban-American writers in a “shifting landscape.” A specialist in Caribbean literature and literary culture, Smorkaloff also published *Readers and Writers in Cuba: A Social History of Print Culture, 1830s–1990s* (1997).

Divided in four chapters, *Cuban Writers on and off the Island* takes a broad approach to Cuban literature, studying the Cuban twentieth-century literary canon from its origins to the present. Authors like Alejo Carpentier and Lezama Lima are linked to younger Cuban-American writers such as Achy Obejas and Oscar Hijuelos. Themes of the home and the world beyond appear throughout the volume “as a framework for exploring the contemporary Cuban literary tradition in an inclusive sense, to acknowledge the blurring of boundaries and the fragility of borders” (p. 8).

To understand Cuban novels of the diaspora, one must go all the way back to a body of works that should be considered foundational in forming the Cuban literary landscape. Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (1953, translated in 1971 as *The Lost Steps*) was published before 1959 (unlike the rest of the novels Smorkaloff covers), but it becomes her point of departure in discussing the role of “the quest” as a major literary theme in novels written on and off the island.

The unnamed composer-narrator-protagonist of Carpentier’s novel represents the displaced Cuban artist of the twentieth century. Alienated in his adopted New York, he looks to Latin America in search of authenticity. Cuban literature is full of characters in search of identity. Probably for that reason, the journey is often the organizing principle in many contemporary Cuban novels: a journey as a means of self-exploration, as in Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos*; a journey as a search for meaning in the past and a quest for significance in origins, as in Lezama Lima’s *Paradiso* (1966; *Paradiso*, 1974); or a journey as a metaphor for life and writing, as in Reinaldo Arenas’s *El mundo alucinante* (1968; *Hallucinations*, 1971). Each text inscribes in its own way a quest or journey in search of origins, historical memory, and the possibility of reclaiming such memory.

Roberto González Echevarría has pointed out that Cuban narrative, especially after 1959, “became obsessed with the relationship between the

individual life and historical change" (1987a, 569). Many autobiographical texts were published in Cuba in the postrevolutionary period. Diverse attempts were made to examine what it means to be Cuban in a shifting world, as Smorkaloff discusses regarding Renée Méndez Capote's *Memorias de una cubanita que nació con el siglo* (1963), Pablo Armando Fernández's *Los niños se despiden* (1968), Edmundo Desnoes's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1965; *Inconsolable Memories*, 1967), and Reinaldo Arenas's *El mundo alucinante* (1969). Méndez Capote and Fernández wrote poetic coming-of-age narratives based on materials from their childhoods linked with their Cuban past (the Cuban Republic and history before 1959).

In Edmundo Desnoes's *Memorias*, "the vocation of writing and cataclysmic historical change relate" (González Echevarría 1987a, 568). Taking place at the beginning of the Revolution, the novel deals with issues of identity and memory in a more realistic and piercing way. For the narrator-protagonist, memory plays a fundamental role in defining the idiosyncracies of a country. Being civilized means knowing not to forget. For Desnoes's narrator, Cubans are underdeveloped because they forget the past easily and live anchored in the present. Smorkaloff discusses how the narrator questions his Cubanness with existentialist cynicism. Feeling European, he views his birth on the island as an error (pp. 23–24).

Reinaldo Arenas's *El mundo alucinante* examines the meaning of being American in a shifting world. The book is essentially a defense of the American identity and "authorial anxiety." Here Arenas, identifying himself with the radical and contradictory Mexican friar Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1763–1827), created an autobiographical "recounting" that parodies history via hyperbole. Official history is dismantled and memory transformed. Smorkaloff points out that through the friar, "We are exposed to all the forces of change in the air at the time, an apt venue for exploring the forces of change operating in the 1960s in Cuba, and throughout the continent" (p. 25). She observes, "In literary terms, Arenas, with his Cuban beginnings and later off-island production, spans the distance from the canon to the diaspora, from Carpentier, to Obejas, to young writers whose work was never nourished by a Cuban landscape yet seeks to reconnect, free of the constraints of nostalgia and false memory, with the social, human, cultural, and historical experience of the island" (p. 9). Smorkaloff analyzes in detail the features that these novels share with the testimonial novel. In her view, Capote, Fernández, Desnoes, and Arenas all escape from the official framework of history, blurring the boundaries that separate fiction from history and reality, to uncover new sources of meaning (p. 19).

Memory, competing visions and versions of events in the narrative of a nation, and the tensions between home and world are prominent features of Cuban-American narrative. The tricks played by memory, when distorted and manipulated, and the possibility of reclaiming its more solid sources are the grounds for establishing a new literary dialogue between

canon and diaspora. Juani Casas, the twenty-four-year old narrator of Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo* (1996) meditates about memory and "the indissoluble connection between memory and historical consciousness" (1996, 32). Having left Cuba as a child, she seeks to sort out "the truth" in the different versions of the Cuban events that surrounded the exile of her family. According to Alvarez Borland, Obejas's novel "exhibits an affirmation as well as a critical relationship to questions of identity and self-definition" (1998, 120).

Smorkaloff perceives Carpentier and Obejas as end markers on "a kind of transnational map." Obejas's writing constitutes "a marker of a spectrum like the canonical master Carpentier, because her work takes on Cuban-Americanness, exploring actively and rigorously what it means to be Cuban-American in the United States today in much the same way that Carpentier's characters have shaped, from the 1930s to the present, questions of Cubanness in the collective consciousness" (p. 2).

Smorkaloff also analyzes, in the context of historical inquiry, displacement and memory in several works by Cuban-American writers Oscar Hijuelos, Cristina García, and Roberto Fernández. *Cuban Writers on and off the Island* concludes by evaluating Cuban-American writing in the context of Latino literature in the United States. In linking Cuban-American writers to other Latino writers in the United States such as Julia Alvarez, Victor Perera, and Rolando Hinojosa, Smorkaloff discusses the current theoretical notions of "hybridity and in-betweenness" as a permanent state of flux in the culture of the Americas, as embraced by Guillermo Gómez Peña. Cuban-American writers are thus part of an inclusive phenomenon of "border crossing and inter-American cultural exchange."

Smorkaloff's treatment of Cuban and Cuban-American literature is original, with some fresh insights but many digressions. Despite her expertise, the critic's textual analysis becomes too sketchy in places. This study would have benefited from concentrating on fewer authors. Although some lists are necessary, as Welsh filmmaker Peter Greenaway would say, the reader of this work gets overwhelmed by the listing of names, bits of information, and plots of the novels. The spirit of *Cuban Writers on and off the Island* is well defined in the preface: "This work goes against the grain of purists and purity and toward a messy, hybrid sense of culture as universal vocation" (p. ix).

Afro-Cuban Literature

Recent critical trends among Hispanists in the United States reveal a keen interest in Cuba, especially regarding questions of race and nationhood. Worth mentioning for their original discussions of Afro-Cubanism are Vera Kutzinski's *Sugar Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (1993); Juan Martínez's *Cuban Art and National Identity: The Vanguardia Painters, 1927–1950*

(1994); Robin Moore's *Nationalizing Blackness: AfroCubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920–1940* (1997); and *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, edited by Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda (1998). Other scholars providing new interpretations of Afro-Cubanism are William Luis (1984), Darién Davis (1997), Lorna Williams (1994), and Gustavo Pérez Firmat (1989).

Edward Mullen's *Afro-Cuban Literature: Critical Junctures* represents an important addition to the studies just mentioned. A professor at the University of Missouri–Columbia, Mullen has coedited the *Afro-Hispanic Review* and written on African American literature, particularly the work of Langston Hughes. This well-structured study using both primary and secondary sources invites readers to analyze the development of Afro-Cubanism diachronically, from its roots in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain through the 1930s. In addition to offering a historical overview of the movement, Mullen discusses how notions of race coupled with emergent nationalism helped shape one of the most fascinating chapters in Cuban literature.

The period following the “official independence” of Cuba in 1902 was one of skepticism and questioning. Under U.S. economic and political tutelage, Cubans began to search for methods of cultural survival (Davis 1997, 73). The early years of this era witnessed constant social unrest and racial problems. Marginalized from public and private employment and disadvantaged in Cuban society, blacks and mulattos formed their own political party called El Partido de los Independientes de Color. In 1912 they staged a rebellion that became known as La Guerrita de los Independientes de Color. The uprisings began in Oriente Province and Las Villas on 20 May 1912 but were almost completely crushed three months later by the government of José Miguel Gómez. Most of the blacks in the movement were killed, along with many other innocent persons. The theme of Cuban identity, which some Cuban intellectuals had tried to formulate since the nineteenth century, was being questioned (Thomas 1971, 514–23).

During the 1920s, Cuban intellectuals wanted to revive José Martí's ideal of racial solidarity in Cuba, and this decade was central for black culture in Cuba. Many writers, musicians, and artists focused on Cuba's African heritage and its significance. Mullen documents how Afro-Cubanism received an important stimulus from European artists and intellectuals (pp. 2–4). After the publication of *Black Decameron* by Leo Frobenius in 1910, African cultures began to be appreciated in Europe. By the end of World War I, many artists and intellectuals (especially those of the avant-garde) were exploring African art and music. In Paris, Pablo Picasso derived inspiration for his first Cubist paintings from African masks; Josephine Baker introduced black America's music and dance; Guillaume Apollinaire published his *Album of Black Sculpture* in 1917; and writers like Paul Morand, André Gide, Blaise Cendrars, Claire Gail, and Phillippe Soupault all flirted with black culture.

In Cuba the *Revista de Avance* (1927–1930) became the main exponent of the European avant-garde. Its pages projected and reflected the urge for renewal in an era searching for social and political change. Some writers responsible for this literary publication were Alejo Carpentier, Martí Casanova, Francisco Ichaso, Félix Ichaso, Jorge Mañach, Juan Marinello, and José Tallet.

Although Afro-Cubanism was stimulated by European interest, it began much earlier. The interest in African themes that started with the arrival of slaves in the sixteenth century was expressed in anti-slavery novels in the nineteenth century, culminating in the publication of *Los negros brujos* in 1906. It was written by Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969), often called the father of Afro-Cuban studies. Ortiz fostered the development of Afro-Cubanism in the 1920s and 1930s. He encouraged the pioneering work of ethnographer Lydia Cabrera (1899–1991), author of *Cuentos negros de Cuba* (1936) and *El monte* (1954), as well as Alejo Carpentier, whose *¡Ecué-Yamba-O!* (1933) resulted from his fascination with surrealism and African themes. Cuban composers also incorporated elements of African music into their work, as in Amadeo Roldán's *La rebambaramba* (1928) and Alejandro García Caturla's *Bembé* (1929) and *La rumba* (1933) (Martínez 1994, 78).

By the end of the 1920s in Cuba, a strong poetic movement based on Afro-Cuban themes had emerged. Among the initiators were Emilio Ballagas, José Manuel Poveda, José Z. Tallet, Ramón Guirao, Nicolás Guillén, and Regino Pedroso. The poets developed two basic tendencies: a folkloric tendency of a musical and sensual nature, and a social tendency that explored human problems of the black race. Important anthologies and critical essays on black poetry were published, and in April 1928, Gustavo Urrutia, one of the first proponents of the rights of blacks on the island, began to publish a Sunday literary page entitled "Ideales de una raza" in the prestigious Havana newspaper *El Diario de la Marina*. Intellectuals of the caliber of Fernando Ortiz, Jorge Mañach, Jesús Castellanos, and José A. Ramos reflected in their essays a social and cultural reality that was undeniable. On that page appeared the first version of Nicolás Guillén's *Motivos de son* (1930). He said of "Ideales de una raza," "It represents an important step in black-white relationships and the search for adequate means to strengthen them" (*Recopilación*, in Morejón 1974, 44).

In this context, Mullen's *Afro-Cuban Literature* helps fill important gaps in the history of the development of the Afro-Cuban movement. First of all, Mullen discusses the cultural dialogue between the United States and Cuba. He asserts that an essential part of the interchange has been linked to questions of race and cultural identity. Mullen refers to U.S. literary models as a productive way to understand "the interpretive issues that have defined Afro-Cubanism" (p. 25). Mullen believes that Afro-Cubanism paralleled to some extent the Harlem Renaissance in the United States. Second, Mullen

places Afro-Cubanism in a wide historical context while tracing the literary portrait of Afro-Hispanism from the Arab conquest of Spain in the eighth century to the Renaissance. Mullen analyses Simeón Aguado's *Entremés de los negros*, a seventeenth-century play, as a foundational work of Afro-Cubanism paradigmatic to future works by Afro-Hispanics. Aguado's theatrical work avoided the stereotypical presentation of blacks as monsters or quintessentially sensual and presented them instead as part of a complex interweaving of social relationships. Mullen also demonstrates with well-chosen examples how Afro-Cubanism entered the literary canon by examining the role of various kinds of Cuban anthologies of *poesía negra*, focusing on Emilio Ballagas's *Antología de poesía negra hispano-americana* (1935), Idelfonso Perera Valdés's *Antología de la poesía negra americana* (1936), and Ramón Guirao's *Orbita de la poesía afrocubana, 1929–1937* (1938). Publication of these anthologies signaled a change in the standards for selection of literary canons. Although compilers of earlier anthologies had considered it their duty to maintain tradition, these editors worked to show "the New World as a product of cultural syncretism" (p. 6).

Mullen's *Afro-Cuban Literature: Critical Junctures* offers stimulating arguments on Cuban literature and expands ways of looking at Afro-Cubanism. Although it would have benefited from more checking of the spelling of Spanish names, words, and titles of works, the book remains a useful work that is not to be ignored.

Rethinking Cubaness

Writing about the importance of Fernando Ortiz in formulating the concept of *cubanidad* and the "complexity of his project," Gustavo Pérez Firmat observes in his essay "Mr. Cuba":

In the case of the black population of Cuba, deculturation involves the extinction of African culture as a signifying totality; acculturation involves the acquisition of fragments of the white man's culture; and neoculturation is the synthesis of the African with the European. Of the three stages, only the last can be said to designate a vernacular or native culture, and one of the difficulties of "acculturation" is its ethnocentrism, since the term assumes an already existing cultural matrix into which outsiders are received. Instead, Ortiz stresses the creative leap, the quantum of novelty inherent in cultural shifts; it is not a matter of entering a stable, already existing culture but of creating a different cultural configuration altogether. By replacing "acculturation" with "transculturation," he means to find a more comprehensive and therefore more exact label for this phenomenon. (P. 31)

Ortiz found that the new word *transculturation* was explicitly linked to the Cuban context: "We have chosen the word *transculturation* to express the highly diverse phenomena that originate in Cuba because of the very complex cultural transmutations that take place here" (1940a, 129). According to Pérez Firmat, the validity of neologisms is thus empirical and local rather than abstract and theoretical because the words develop out of the

specific circumstances of cultural interaction in Cuba. Ortiz argued that the salient characteristic of this interaction was its unfinished nature. In his view, Cuban culture is “a vital concept of constant fluidity” rather than “a synthetic reality, already formed and known” (1939, p. 4). Cuban culture has not yet reached the state of neoculturation. Its distinctiveness derives from being ongoing, in process. Cuban culture is characterized by “mutability, openness, uprootedness”:

There were no more transcendental factors in the formation of Cubanness than those continuous, radical, and contrasting geographical, economic, and social trans-migrations of its inhabitants; the perennial transitoriness of purpose, that way of life always uprooted from the land it inhabited, always at odds with the society that sustained it. Human beings, economies, cultures and desires—everything here felt foreign, provisional, changeable, like “migratory birds” crossing the country at its expense, against its wishes, and to its detriment. (Ortiz 1940a, 133)

For Pérez Firmat, *transculturation* “properly designates the fermentation and turmoil that precedes synthesis. For this reason, *transculturation*, a coinage that denotes transition, passage, process, is the best name for the Cuban condition” (p. 23). The “processual view of Cuban culture” is further clarified in Ortiz’s well-known essay, “Los factores humanos de la cubanidad.” In discussing *transculturation*, Ortiz added the household metaphor of *ajiaco* (a Cuban stew), analyzed here by Pérez Firmat:

First, since the *ajiaco* is made by combining a variety of meats and vegetables (whichever ones happen to be available), it conveys the ethnic diversity of Cuba. Second, the *ajiaco* is agglutinative rather than synthetic; even if the diverse ingredients form part of a new culinary entity, they do not lose their original flavor and identity. So it is with Cuba, where each ethnic or cultural component has retained its identity, where the mixture of cultures has not led to a neoculturative synthesis. Third, an *ajiaco* is indefinitely replenishable, since new ingredients can be added to the stew as old ones are used up. In this respect, this dish symbolizes the continuing infusion of new elements into the Cuban cultural mix, those “continuous trans-migrations” that he [Ortiz] mentions in the other essay. Lastly, *ajiaco* is itself an onomastic, since it combines the African name of an Amerindian condiment, the *ají* or red pepper, with a Spanish suffix, *-aco*. As an edible emblem of “cubanidad,” the *ajiaco* criollo gives concrete shape to the abstract notion of *transculturation*. “*Transculturation*” is the theoretical name; “*ajiaco*” is the corresponding image. (Pp. 33–34)

Pérez Firmat’s incisive reflections on Cuban culture are far-reaching and often controversial, but they always provide food for thought. He typically combines scholarly pursuits with literary ambitions, using wit and humor to revitalize much of the existing criticism on the subject of Cuba. The resulting style can be seen in *My Own Private Cuba: Essays on Cuban Literature and Culture*. Born in Havana in 1949, Gustavo Pérez Firmat left Cuba when he was eleven and was raised in Miami. Today he is professor of Spanish at Columbia University, a prolific writer, and a key figure in the field of Cuban studies.

The first part of *My Own Private Cuba* contains nine essays from *The*

Cuban Condition (1989), three of them dedicated to Ortiz (including "Mr. Cuba"). Other essays analyze the work of Nicolás Guillén, Eugenio Florit, Carlos Loveira, and Luis Felipe Rodríguez. The second part of the volume brings together essays on Alejo Carpentier, Fernando Ortiz, Jorge Mañach, and José Lezama Lima. Here the propositions made in *The Cuban Condition* are discussed and expanded. The epilogue, the essay "My Own Private Cuba," was first delivered as the keynote address at the Second Annual South Florida Symposium on Cuba in September 1997. The other essays in the second part were published previously in various journals (*Diacritics*, *Notebooks in Cultural Analysis*, and *Caribe: Revista de Cultura y Literatura*) or in *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* Pérez Firmat asserts that *My Own Private Cuba*, his collection of essays entitled *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (1994), and his autobiographical novel *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America* (1995) together form a trilogy "that develops a certain view of *cubanía*, one way of understanding the island's literature and culture" (p. 96).

My Own Private Cuba presents a brilliant analysis of the theme of *cubanidad* or "Cubanness." Pérez Firmat argues that there are at least three different terms that define the Cuban condition: *cubanidad*, *cubanía*, and *cubaneó*. Although all three are translated as *Cubanness* in English, can be taken "as markers of nationality," and sometimes mean the same thing, they really refer to "distinct areas of experience."

Of the three terms, the most widespread is *cubanidad*, which dates from the nineteenth century and played an important role in the Cuban nationalist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Ortiz defined *cubanidad* as "the generic condition of being Cuban" (1940b, 166). This definition is generic rather than individual, uniform rather than idiosyncratic. In its limited sense, *cubanidad* designates the junction of nationality and citizenship. As such, the word basically represents a civil status that takes form based on documents like a birth certificate, a passport, or a naturalization statement. For that reason, *cubanidad* is perhaps the most fragile representation of Cuban nationality. *Cubaneó* is also manifested externally but does not derive from official documents or government decrees. It is instead "a loose repertoire" of mannerisms, customs, and vocabulary. Rather than referring to a civil status, it names a state of mind, "a mood, a temperament, what used to be called 'national character.'" As Pérez Firmat explains, "Its frame of reference is not *un país*—a political entity—but *un pueblo*—a social and cultural entity" (p. 231).

In contrast to *cubanidad*, which is generally evoked in a positive way, the term *cubaneó* carries negative connotations. Pérez Firmat considers that for Cubans like himself who live in exile, *cubaneó* is not necessarily a bad thing: "*cubaneó* may be the next best thing to Cuba, a buffer against loneliness and alienation" (p. 232).

Ortiz defined *cubanía* as a higher and more complete Cubanness, "a

full Cubanness, felt, conscious and desired" (p. 233). Rather than "an accident of birth or a menu of manners and mannerisms," *cubanía* for Pérez Firmat is part of the interior life of Cubans—"it's not asserted" but felt and desired. It is not a reflex "but a choice." *Cubanía* is something that cannot "be granted or taken away" (p. 233). Pérez Firmat summarizes the differences among the three words: "*Cubanía* finds expression not in a nation—*un país*—and not in a people—*un pueblo*—but in something more abstract and ineffable—in a homeland, *una patria*. So: *cubanidad*, *cubaneo*, *cubanía*—all are valid and valuable manifestations of 'lo cubano,' what is Cuban. Without *cubanidad*, civil society is chaotic; without *cubaneo*, social intercourse is lifeless; without *cubanía*, *cubanidad* and *cubaneo* lose their spiritual mooring" (pp. 233–34).

Pérez Firmat returns repeatedly to Jorge Mañach and Fernando Ortiz to analyze two contradictory foundational views of Cuban culture. Mañach's writings exhibit a pronounced tendency toward logical thought, a distancing and "magisterial" tone that make his writings read like a lesson. *My Own Private Cuba* analyzes Mañach's *Glosas* (1924), *Indagación del choteo* (1928), and *Historia y estilo* (1944).

As Pérez Firmat explains, Ortiz's works speak in an alternate voice, one that seeks knowledge but avoids "mastery." In Ortiz's work, "knowledge is supplemented not by wisdom but by savvy, a term that I connect not just to *saber* (to know) but also to *sabor* (to taste)" (p. 4). Pérez Firmat's essays on Ortiz are more inclusive, with discussions of *Los negros brujos* (1906), *Un catauro de cubanismos* (1923), *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940a; translated in 1970 as *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*), and the essays "La cubanidad y los negros" (1939), "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad" (1940b), and "Del fenómeno social de la 'transculturación'" (1940c).

The distinction made by Pérez Firmat between Mañach's "knowledge" and the "knowledge-flavor" of Ortiz allows readers to understand much of the critiques of Cuban studies made by Cuban-born critics. Significant examples are *La ruta de Severo Sarduy* (1987a) by Roberto González Echevarría, *La isla que se repite* (1989, *The Repeating Island*, 1992) by Antonio Benítez Rojo, and many essays by Pérez Firmat, particularly those in *The Cuban Condition*, *Life on the Hyphen*, and most recently, *My Own Private Cuba*.

The four books reviewed here offer a vision of Cuban cultural multiplicity. Linked by the themes of cultural identity and the diversity of Cuban literature, these studies complement each other well. Davies's approximate analysis of the Afro-Cuban theme is masterfully developed by Mullen in explaining the origins and development of Afro-Cubanism. This study is closely related to Pérez Firmat's *My Own Private Cuba* in its discussion of the formation of "lo cubano," particularly the seminal theories of Fernando Ortiz. Smorkaloff examines Cuban literature as currently expressed and discusses the theme of construction of identity in the context of nation and

national culture, while Davies places it in the context of Cuban women writers. Like Mullen, Smorkaloff includes Pérez Firmat in her study and establishes connections with the Cuban literary tradition. Echoing Edouard Glissant's observations about the Caribbean, it can be said of these four works, "Sameness is subliminal difference; diversity is accepted difference."

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