From the Cuban Ajiaco to the Cuban-American Hyphen: Changing Discourses of National Identity on the Island and in the Diaspora

Jorge Duany

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/csa

Part of the International Relations Commons, Latin American Studies Commons, Place and Environment Commons, and the Sociology of Culture Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute of Cuban and Cuban American Studies at Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cuban Studies Association Occasional Papers by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.
From the Cuban *ajiaco* to the Cuban-American Hyphen

*Jorge Duany*

CSA Occasional Paper Series,
Vol. 2, No. 8
October 15, 1997
From the Cuban ajiaco to the Cuban-American Hyphen: Changing Discourses of National Identity on the Island and in the Diaspora

Jorge Duany

University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras
From the Cuban Ajiaco to the Cuban-American Hyphen: Changing Discourses of National Identity on the Island and in the Diaspora

by Jorge Duany

At a recent gathering of Cuban and Cuban-American scholars, much of the discussion revolved around the cultural identity of Cuban communities settled outside the Island, not only in the United States, but also in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Mexico, and Spain. Regardless of each author’s views on the extent of transculturation among Cuban émigrés, most presentations displayed an essentialist concept of the nation as a concrete and stable entity, coupled with a sovereign state, a territory with well-defined frontiers, and a relatively homogeneous culture. Thus far, scholars have tended to speak about a Cuban language, literature, music, cinema, art, or architecture as the product of a strong national consciousness that exists “out there” and awaits to be defined, defended, and promoted.

Another meeting of creative writers, artists, literary critics, and social scientists from Cuba and the United States reiterated the need to revisit national identity both on the Island and in the diaspora.

1 A summary of this paper was presented at the XXII Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association, Barranquilla, Colombia, May 26-30, 1997; and at the Second Annual South Florida Symposium on Cuba, Cuban Studies Association, Miami, September 13-14, 1997. I would like to thank Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, Arlene Davila, Damián Fernández, María Teresa Marrero, Marian Z. Sugano, and Ruth Behar for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 I am referring to the International Workshop on “The Cuban Community Abroad: Profiles and Processes in the 1990s,” organized by the Center for the Study of Policy Alternatives, University of Havana, June 20-22, 1996.


4 Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos and Universidad de La Habana, Cuba: cultura e identidad nacional (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1995).
A common thread in much of the writing on Cubanness has been the recurrent use of a telluric, agricultural, or arboreal language, full of metaphoric references to roots, uprootedness, transplants, the mother earth, and the trunk of national culture. When analyzing the cultural production of Cubans in Cuba and abroad—whether it be literary, musical, or artistic works—, critics frequently recycle such images. One Cuban scholar went so far as to characterize recent exile literature as "torn from its stem" (desgajada de su tronco), that is, from the Cuban nation. Such figurative language localizes one's sense of belonging in a confined space and contributes to territorialize and naturalize national identity, to exclude the possibility that national identity may "flourish" or "bloom" outside the soil of the fatherland, and to view the diaspora as alien and distinct from the nation. Despite representing an advance over the prior labeling of Cuban exiles as gusanos (worms), the title of two recent conferences organized by the Cuban government on "The Nation and Emigration" suggests that it still treats the two categories—nation/emigration—as disjointed from each other.

In this essay, I will argue that the dominant discourses of Cuban national identity have traditionally excluded the cultural expressions of diaspora communities, principally for ideological reasons since the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Prior to that date, the émigrés were either ignored or neglected for geographic, demographic, or linguistic reasons: they tended to live in small enclaves in south Florida and New York and were expected to assimilate quickly into Anglo-American culture. However, the construction of the Cuban nation has been inextricably linked to the political projects of Cubans in exile at least since the late eighteenth century. According to Lisandro Pérez, "[d]uring the nineteenth century, Cuban nationalism truly arose and developed in the Cuban communities of New York, Tampa, and

---

5 I am quoting Sonia Bravo's presentation in the panel on "Culture and National Identity," at the International Workshop on "The Cuban Community Abroad." For a recent anthology of musical writing from a similar nationalistic perspective, see Radames Giro, ed., *Panorama de la música popular cubana* (Santiago de Cali: Editorial Universidad del Valle, 1997).

6 See the documents collected in the dossier on the conference *La nación y la emigración*, and the first issue of *Correo de Cuba*, both published in 1995.
Key West.” José Martí, considered by all Cubans to be the founder of the fatherland, is the most famous example of how the émigrés dreamt of their nation and contributed to imagining its cultural identity from abroad. "Cubanness" has been defined across divergent and often contradictory positions based on the intersections among class, ethnicity, race, gender, generation, ideology, and place of residence, among other variables. The absence of the diaspora in Cuban nationalist discourse is therefore a major intellectual and political problem for contemporary scholars.

I will also argue that this exclusion is based on certain discursive practices, such as the rhetoric of roots, common in canonical texts about lo cubano in poetry, music, the visual arts, history, psychology, and anthropology. Thus, installing the diaspora as a central part of the reflection on Cuban identity will require a major shift in the conventional terms with which one thinks about the relation between the nation and emigration. To use Homi Bhabha’s felicitous expression, it will require revising the way one narrates the Cuban nation. A contemporary rereading of several foundational essays on lo cubano written on the Island—such as Indagación del choteo by the philosopher Jorge Mañach (1928); “Los factores humanos


8 See Gerald E. Poyo, “With All, and for the Good of All: The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1842-1898” (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1990); James S. Olson and Judith E. Olson, Cuban Americans: From Trauma to Triumph (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995); Consuelo Naranjo, Miguel A. Puig-Samper, and Luis Miguel García Mora, eds., La nación soñada: Cuba, Puerto Rico y Filipinas ante el 98 (Aranjuez: Doce Calles, 1996); and Nancy Raquel Mirabal, “Con sus manos y sus ardientes corazones: Race and Gender in the Cuban Migration and Settlement of Women in the U.S. During the Late Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Centuries” (paper prepared for the Second Annual South Florida Symposium on Cuba, Cuban Studies Association, Miami, September 13-14, 1997).

9 Even the massive return migration to Cuba after 1959 has not been the object of much academic research. See Cynthia Barrera Valdés, “Una migración por descubrir: estudio del retorno a Cuba en los primeros años de la Revolución,” Tesis de licenciatura, University of Havana, June 1996.

de la cubanidad,” by the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1940); *Lo cubano en la poesía* by the poet Cintio Vitier (1958); and *El ingenio* by the historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals (1964)--will set the stage for more recent texts produced in the diaspora, namely, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* by the literary critic Gustavo Pérez-Firmat (1994) and *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*, edited by the anthropologist Ruth Behar and the literary critic Juan León (1994). My basic thesis is that scholars should move away from the customary distinction between the nation and emigration, where the first category is firmly rooted in a fixed territory with a stable core of culture and the second is uprooted from its ancestral origins with a displaced sense of self. Alternatively, it might be useful to explore a new language, an aesthetic of traveling cultures, border crossings, and nomad identities to redraw the symbolic boundaries between Cubanness here and there.

**Deconstructing Identity**

Contemporary thinking about cultural identities emphasizes their socially constructed, imagined, and often invented character, as well as their historically contingent and strategically situated meanings. National identity, in particular, is always represented through certain symbolic images and discursive practices, such as holy icons, myths, rituals, heroes, commemorations, maps, and landscapes. The Cuban Revolution itself has cultivated a large share of national icons, such as the foundational figure of José Martí, the epic guerrilla warfare at the Sierra Maestra, or the heroic resistance against the invasion of Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs to Cuban-Americans). Marxist historians and literary critics have enshrined the narrative of linear progression of the Cuban nation from the Spanish colony,

---

through the neocolonial Republic, to the socialist revolution. Since 1959, Cuban intellectuals have made a concerted effort to articulate and institutionalize a particular view of the past to justify the present. Like other postcolonial societies, Cuba has been imagined as a coherent nation without internal fragmentation, except for the deep rift between those remaining on the Island and those living in exile. But that is precisely the point: the Cuban diaspora has usually been represented as lying outside the nation, not as part of its current history and culture.

One of the most powerful and persistent visual images of nationalist discourse is the metaphor of cultural “roots.” The allegory of physical rootedness corresponds closely with the ideological attempt to establish clearly bounded and self-contained categories for the nation, state, and citizenship. Thus, national identity becomes strictly associated with the

---


13 Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments; see also his Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?, second edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

14 At this point, it is worth quoting at length a passage from the Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco: “Cultural debates on postcolonialism, and about the relationship between other U.S.-based Latinos and the populations and cultures of their homelands have matured significantly in the last decade. These factors... demand a paradigm shift in the way we think about Cuban culture, Cuban cultural identity, and “revolutionary” cultural activity. We must rethink our priorities and define alliances not on the basis of territoriality but shared interests. Nationality has been a Cold War game. Identity, for Cubans, goes far beyond it ("El Diario de Miranda/Miranda’s Diary,” in Ruth Behar and Juan León, eds., Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba, Michigan Quarterly Review 33, 3 [1994]:486).

homeland; a country's territory is imbued with a sacred and eternal essence; foreign intrusion is perceived as a form of uprooting and contamination; and exile appears as spiritual banishment from one's native land. Those forced to live outside their country of birth are portrayed as transplanted, their weak and displaced roots eroded by a new climate. Scholars have shown that organic metaphors have been central figures of nationalist thought in Europe and elsewhere. For example, the oak tree has long stood as an emblem of the British people. Thus, it is difficult to imagine a nation without making reference to the birth, growth, and maturity of a country and its people. More than two centuries of nationalist writing have accustomed scholars to the sedentary notion that nations are "rooted" in their native soil and "uprooted" in the diaspora.

As many contemporary critics have argued, such discursive practices are based on a territorial, unitary, and essentialist conception of the nation. In this view, nations are clearly defined by geographic and cultural frontiers that facilitate the equation among country, people, landscape, homeland, government, citizenship, and language. The nation is then constructed as a homogeneous space and "empty time" in ideological, linguistic, and even physical terms. As Joseph Stalin once claimed, all citizens of a nation are supposed to share the same territory, history, language, economy, culture, and even psychology. Each nation is considered a unique, natural, primordial, immutable, and uniform entity, which has to be respected, consecrated, and commemorated. Nationalist thought has often been characterized as essentialist and fundamentalist because it takes for granted a socially constructed reality.

Recent work in the social sciences and the humanities has thoroughly deconstructed the ideological premises of nationalist discourse. Most scholars now agree that nationalism constitutes its own subject through a series of exclusionary and inclusionary practices. The

__________________________


17 The term was coined by Anderson, *Imagined Communities.*
most basic operation involves a binary opposition between “us” (the members of the nation) and “them” (the others). In colonial societies, this dichotomy often represents one’s oppressed nation as the source of moral and spiritual values, and the imperial power as a political and material invasion. In most places, the construction of a national imaginary requires the establishment of symbolic boundaries, the identification of cultural attributes as emblematic of the nation, and the diffusion of those attributes by an intellectual elite. Oftentimes, the “essence” of a nation boils down to a series of “invented traditions” such as folk tales, material artefacts, or ritual performances closely linked with a particular world view, usually that of the dominant class.

Poststructuralist thinkers have shown that the language of a discourse is as revealing as its ideological content—or better still, that the two are part of the same process of producing meaning. Thus, the constant use of agricultural and organic metaphors in nationalist discourse suggests that the construction of identities (both collective and personal) is natural, universal, and inevitable, like the growth of a tree. Here, the telluric language acquires mythical and ritual connotations. If the nation is like a plant, and identity is grounded in the nation, then anyone who comes from outside that land or moves abroad is foreign. Roots cannot easily be transplanted or transported. The nationalist imagery of roots and uprooting therefore marks identity as an earthy substance that can only grow and prosper within the confines of one’s native soil.

---

18 See Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World.*


The practical consequences of these mental categories are ominous. For if national identity is forever linked with a particular landscape, the relationship between culture and geography is fixed and indissoluble. People can never become part of another nation even if they live permanently within its state borders. It follows that people should stay put or risk losing their identity. Nations should always coincide with states; geopolitical frontiers should never be transgressed. Diasporas undermine the very definition of national identities because they scatter the seeds of those identities. Evidently, the ideological premises of nationalism can lead to violent conflicts about the relationship between land and people, such as civil wars and frontier disputes; this is the "ugly" side of nationalist thinking. Yet nationalism has also produced the more positive assumption in international relations that each country, no matter how small, has a right to self-determination (and therefore to protect its own borders from external threats to sovereignty). More problematic is nationalism's ambivalence toward the decoupling between state and nation that often accompanies the growth and dispersal of diaspora communities, as in the case of revolutionary Cuba. Let me now turn to a closer examination of Cuban nationalist discourse during the twentieth century.21

Taking Humor Seriously

The first text I want to discuss is Jorge Mañach's *Indagación del choteo,*22 a classic example of nationalist thinking in Cuba. I am interested in this text because of its insightful analysis of the everyday life of the Cuban people, its detailed attention to popular language, its controversial psychological interpretation of collective practices, and its glaring exclusion of the diaspora, as if Cuban humor could not thrive outside the native soil.23 Originally

---

21 I am purposely avoiding the discussion of nineteenth-century nationalism in Cuba, because of space limitations and because the literature on this period, especially on Martí, is abundant. See Poyo, "*With All, and For the Good of All;*" and Santí, "José Martí and the Cuban Revolution."


23 This statement is easily falsified by a quick reading of Guillermo Cabrera Infante's narrative work in exile or listening to Guillermo Álvarez Guedes' recorded jokes.
published in 1928, the essay was first given as a lecture at the Institución Hispano-Cubana de Cultura in Havana, headed by Fernando Ortiz. Mañach’s project forms part of a wider cultural and political movement, grouped around the Revista de Avance (1927-1930) and animated by a strong nationalism in the midst of Cuba’s political and economic crisis during the late 1920s and early 1930s (the years of Machado’s presidency and dictatorship).  

Mañach begins by questioning the traditional distinction between serious and light topics and then focusing on “the small and familiar things, the humble things around us.” Adopting an ethnographic tone, he later asserts: “what is minute and immediate is what constitutes our circumstance” (p. 10). For Mañach, the psychosocial analysis of Cuban humor—el choteo—is only a pretext to unravel the Island’s national character, through a close inspection of its typical traits and collective habits. In his view, choteo represents an individual self-assertion, independence, and rebelliousness against authority and order. As a characteristic gesture of Cuban culture, choteo reflects a tendency toward social leveling as well as a “peculiar tropical psyche” (p. 43) due to the Island’s Caribbean location. Mañach also hints at certain Hispanic, specifically Andalusian, and African influences in Cuban choteo, but does not elaborate on these themes. After all, he is much more concerned with “the nature of the phenomenon” than with its causes or consequences (p. 11).

According to Mañach, choteo articulates a series of psychological traits of el cubano, used in singular and masculine (as opposed to lo cubano, which will dominate later writings on the topic). Cubanness is characterized by lightheartedness, trust, familiarity, indiscipline, improvisation, comradeship, and egalitarianism, among other values. Such qualities are supposed to be immanent to the national character, although Mañach recognizes that they have evolved throughout the colonial and neocolonial history of Cuba. In the end, Mañach assigns a preponderant weight to the tropical climate in explaining the Cuban’s irreverent attitude, without denying the role of collective experiences. Mañach’s essay lacks the abundance of agricultural metaphors common to other nationalist texts; his rhetoric is highly

---

conceptual and abstract, more typical of a psychological monograph. Still, Mañach approaches Cuban identity primarily in geographic terms. His most powerful visual images derived from the physical environment: “the brilliant and vibrant light [of the tropics] seems to annul the distances and chiaroscuros” (p. 56). The idea of “rooting” the collective psyche in a territorial sphere has long seduced nationalists like Mañach.

Mañach’s intellectual project must be situated within the historical context of Cuban and other Latin American societies. As editor of the short-lived but influential Revista de Avance, Mañach led a utopian attempt to renovate national culture and politics through a wider interaction between local and foreign writers and artists. Thus, Indagación del choteo makes frequent references to the philosophical and literary vanguard of the period, including Unamuno, Bergson, William James, Nietzsche, and Simmel. The quest for national identity was also a major concern for Latin American intellectuals during the 1920s and 1930s, as witnessed by the cases of Antonio Pedreira in Puerto Rico, José Carlos Mariátegui in Peru, and Samuel Ramos in Mexico. Mañach shared with these authors a desire to define and reform the psychological traits of their countries’ national character, as well as the conviction that intellectual elites could lead the popular masses in the struggle for self-determination and modernization. In this regard, Indagación del choteo can be read as a polemical reflection on the heroic role of the educated minority in the epic of the Cuban nation.

---

25 It should also be placed in the context of Mañach’s personal and political trajectory in Cuba and in exile. For more details on his life and times, see J. Hernández Meneses et al., Jorge Mañach (1898-1961): homenaje de la nación cubana (Río Piedras: Editorial de San Juan, 1972).

26 See Roberto Fernández Valledor, Identidad nacional y sociedad en la ensayística cubana y puertorriqueña (1920-1940): Mañach, Marinello, Pedreira y Blanco (San Juan: Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1993). A classical text of nationalist thought in Puerto Rico, Antonio Pedreira’s Insularismo (Río Piedras: Edil, 1992 [1934]), shares Mañach’s geographic determinism as well as employs the rhetoric of roots to describe the origins of the Island’s cultural identity.

27 In the early 1930s, Mañach joined other Cuban intellectuals in the ABC Revolutionary Society, which advocated the use of violence against the government. This group led the popular opposition to the Machado dictatorship, along with the student movement and other nationalist and revolutionary groups.
Mañach’s approach to his subject is nothing short of ambivalent. On the one hand, he justifies his study of a “light” topic as an essential aspect of Cuba’s popular culture: “Choteo—a familiar, minute, and festive thing—is a form of relation that we consider typically ours” (p. 11). He then deploys an erudite knowledge of linguistic, ethnographic, and philosophical methods to convince the reader that choteo is worth taking seriously. His analysis clearly shows that Cubans have “a special and systematic way” (p. 45) of desacralizing social institutions, especially when these are illegitimate and improvised, as they often were in Cuba after independence from Spain. On the other hand, the author condemns the Cubans’ relaxation of social hierarchies and “noble” forms of distinction, such as intellectual prestige. For Mañach, the indiscriminate application of choteo to all established forms of authority leads to anarchy and anomie. He therefore proposes an educational process to impose respect, discipline, and order within Cuban families to regenerate the nation. Mañach’s combination of critical distance and personal attraction toward popular culture is emblematic of his social class and historical period.

In sum, Indagación del choteo inaugurates an entire generation’s soul-searching for the essences of Cuba’s national identity. Although the text pays lip service to the historical, political, and economic transmutations of el cubano (p. 61), it fixes and immobilizes a particular way of thinking and joking as prototypical of a collective mentality. Mañach’s serious, detached, and academic pose itself contradicts the idea that all Cubans are always engaged in choteo. Moreover, the text approaches identity as an immutable substance that can be observed and dissected much like other natural phenomena. The essay takes for granted the existence of el cubano, a basic personality structure shared by those who live in Cuba. (Again, nothing is said about Cubans who live abroad.) But this assumption is never proven because of the highly anecdotal and impressionistic nature of Mañach’s essay. In retrospect, the main value of Indagación del choteo is that it clearly articulates the paradoxes

---

of Cuba's nationalist intelligentsia during the first half of the twentieth century: anti-imperialist but elitist, reformist but paternalistic, illustrated but frustrated in its ambition to lead the nation.

Notwithstanding its limitations, Mañach's essay captures a central feature of national identity in Cuba, which many later writers have commented upon. Informality and suspicion toward all institutionalized forms of authority, as well as a humorous approach to ceremonial norms of conduct in everyday life, are widely shared by the Cuban people. One does not have to accept Mañach's dictum that "there are in Cuban idiosyncracy certain peculiar traits... originating in the climate" (p. 49) to realize that el choteo is a special way of celebrating life and avoiding the pitfalls of pomp and circumstance. Furthermore, Mañach's careful attention to the small details of daily routines and ritual idioms provides a healthy antidote to the grandiloquent poses of much public discourse in Cuba and elsewhere. Stripped of its geographic determinism and social elitism, Indagación del choteo well deserves its prominent place in Cuba's long nationalist tradition.

Cooking Up the Stew

If Mañach's name is closely associated with choteo, Fernando Ortiz's most memorable image is el ajiaco, a Cuban soup or stew. Ortiz first introduced the metaphor of Cuban culture as an ajiaco in a 1939 lecture at the University of Havana, which was subsequently cited and reproduced on many occasions. If any essay on Cuban identity deserves to be called a canonical text, it is "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad." Here Ortiz moves away from Mañach's prototype of el cubano (the Cuban) to lo cubano (Cubanness) as a vague sense of cultural belonging beyond geographic terms of reference, such as place of birth or residence. Ortiz emphasizes the subjective consciousness and will to be a Cuban rather than external features such as national origin, citizenship, or race. Thus, he counters the effort by much nationalist thinking to identify certain collective traits and traditional customs as

the essence of national identity. For Ortiz, national identity has no essence; it is always in
the process of becoming.

Ortiz’s discourse is radically antiessentialist because it never pinpoints the core of
Cuban culture, other than lacking such a core. The famous metaphor of the ajiaco (proposed
in lieu of the American melting pot) serves to index the intense racial and cultural mixture
among numerous ethnic ingredients: indigenous, Spanish, African, Asiatic, Anglo-American,
and French. For Ortiz, the basis of contemporary Cuban culture was the constant
immigration and settlement of various groups since the end of the fifteenth century.
(Emigration from Cuba does not appear at all in his conceptualization.) In his equally
famous Cuban Counterpoint, Ortiz argues:

There was no more important human factor in the evolution of Cuba than
these continuous, radical, contrasting geographic transmigrations, economic
and social, of the first settlers, this perennial transitory nature of their
objectives, and their unstable life in the land where they were living, in
perpetual disharmony with the society from which they drew their living.30

As a rhetorical figure, the ajiaco represents the creative synthesis of diverse elements as part
of the process of transculturation, a term Ortiz proposes to substitute for acculturation in the
Cuban Counterpoint. The blending together of various peoples and cultures in Cuba entailed
their “deracialization,” to use a contemporary term,31 as well as their deracination from their
prior homelands. Ortiz’s defining exercise is ultimately indefinite insofar as it posits fluidity
and hybridity as keys to Cuban identity.

In “Los factores humanos de la cubanidad,” Ortiz elaborates the symbolic language
of roots, so pervasive in Cuban and other countries’ nationalist discourse. Firstly, the ajiaco
is fundamentally a culinary image, where roots literally lose their connection to the land as
they are boiled in water. Moreover, the author underlines the mingling of various indigenous

This is the English translation of Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar (Havana: Editorial

31 Here I am taking a cue from Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Racial Formation in the
staples—such as yucca, corn, and potatoes—with imported vegetables, meats, and spices. Following this logic, Ortiz refers to Taino culture as the “basic sedimentation” of the Cuban nation, while Spanish culture formed the “trunk” and African culture was “rooted out” of its native land (pp. 23-24). The three main strands of contemporary Cuban culture were all “uprooted,” “transplanted,” and “torn apart” by the Spanish Conquest and colonization of the Island. The first African and Spanish immigrants who became “rooted to the land,” “acclimated to the soil,” and _aplatinados_ (adapted to the Island) broke new ground for the development of national culture. Ortiz’s telluric imagery reaches a poetic climax when he makes a mystical connection between Cubanness and the “Mother Earth,” present in “all the sedimentations, in the mountains, in the hillsides, in the valleys, in the savannas, and even in the marshlands” (p. 14).

Despite its eloquence, such metaphorical language obscures as much as it reveals about Cuban identity. For one thing, Ortiz assumes an unproblematic relation between national character and insular territory, much like Mañach presupposes that Cuban humor is produced by tropical geography. Ortiz’s lyrical approach to Cuba’s physical and cultural landscape does not clarify how, why, and when Cuba was imagined as a national community, or what discursive practices constructed “what is typical of this country and of its people” (p. 12). In the end, the text advances a circular argument to define _lo cubano_: “One is Cuban by forming part of this human nucleus called the people or society of Cuba” (p. 12). But that is precisely the question: where, who, and what is the Cuban people, who constitutes and represents it? Among the most notable absences from this discourse, again, is any serious consideration of the relation between Cubans on the Island and in the diaspora. By the time Ortiz was developing his ideas about Cubanness, thousands of his compatriots had moved abroad, especially the United States.32

So, even though the image of the _ajíaco_ may be more culturally appropriate to Cuba than that of the melting pot, it does not solve the problem of conceptualizing the complex

---

and dynamic character of national identity. One of its key limitations is the incapacity to
describe or explain the processes of racial and cultural fusion and separation, as they took
place in Cuba and other places. To follow the simile, the ajiaco’s ingredients lose their
original flavor when they are cooked together and acquire a totally different texture as a
soup. But the Spanish and African components of Cuban culture have not merged to form
a seamless whole. Nor have white and black Cubans mingled together to create a cosmic
race. Thus, Ortiz’s integrationist discourse overlooks color differences (as well as other social
distinctions based on class, gender, and region) in his attempt to promote a racially
harmonious nation.33 (It should be remembered that Ortiz was both a scholar and a
politician, particularly between 1917 and 1930.) Moreover, the ajiaco image unwittingly
contributes to racialize cultural differences by comparing the process of constructing the
nation to the chemical fusion of biological substances. Finally, some ingredients seem more
important than others in defining the Cuban nation, just as in preparing the ajiaco, the main
roots tend to come from the Spanish “trunk” and the Taino “sedimentation,” not the
“uprooted” Africans.

Despite such objections, the ajiaco remains an attractive icon for Cubanness.
Admittedly, it does not characterize national identity as a single trait or constellation of
related traits like choteo. Neither does it appeal to a heroic figure like Martí or a particular
segment of the population like upper-class whites to define who is a Cuban. In this sense,
the ajiaco is an utterly democratic and even populist image. Furthermore, it suggests that
national culture is marked by impurity, syncretism, and heterogeneity. Hence, Cubanness
is best conceived as a multicultural pastiche or collage—an approach that fits well with the
postmodern celebration of diversity and fragmentation. However, the master image of the

---

33 On the neglect of racial differences in Cuba’s nationalist discourse, see Alejandro de la
Fuente, “Cubans or Afro Cubans? Race, National Discourse, and Politics in Cuba” (paper
presented at the Conference on Race, Culture, and National Identity in the Afro-American
Diaspora, University of Florida, Gainesville, February 21-24, 1996); and Pedro Pérez Sarduy
and Jean Stubbs, eds., AfroCuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics, and Culture
(Victoria, Australia: Ocean Press, 1993).
The Search for a Cuban Essence

A third key moment in the development of Cuban nationalist discourse is the monumental work by the poet, literary critic, and now politician Cintio Vitier, *Lo cubano en la poesía*. Originally prepared as a lecture course at the Lyceum de La Habana in 1957, the essay was first published in 1958 and reprinted in 1970. Vitier’s is an insightful though idiosyncratic interpretation of the evolution of a sense of Cubanness through the major poetic texts written in the Island and sometimes in the diaspora from Spanish colonial times to the 1950s. The author sought and found a peculiar way of being Cuban in the lyrical treatment of the Island’s nature, vernacular character, and Creole spirit, as manifested in the founding figures of Cuban literature, such as José María Heredia, José Martí, Julián del Casal, Nicolás Guillén, and José Lezama Lima. Although Vitier admits that Cubanness cannot be defined as an “immobile essence” or a “fixed entity” (p. 18), he ends up by fixing the literary essence of *lo cubano* in ten recurrent themes, including the innocence of the natural scenery, the mythical image of the Island from a distance, and the baroque style (p. 573).

Contrary to Manach and Ortiz, Vitier systematically avoids psychological and sociological analyses and focuses instead on the strictly literary expressions of national identity. He does not approach literature as a reflex of social and political circumstances, nor patriotism as the most characteristic emotion of *lo cubano*. Rather, his project is to trace the spiritual progress of the Cuban nation since its foundations in the early nineteenth century. His narrative is structured around the metaphor of organic growth—the birth, maturation, and consolidation of national consciousness. However, Vitier denies that Cubanness was constituted by telluric forces: on the contrary, their absence is one of the key features of the

---

34 As I will note later, Pérez-Firmat has reappropriated the *ajíaco* trope in his analysis of the Cuban community in the United States. See also Pérez-Firmat’s interpretation of Ortiz’s image in his *The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially Chapter 1.

Cuban world view. From his standpoint, Cuban identity is better represented as "marine and aerial, rather than from the land" (p. 580). This is an important insight, though often overlooked in later commentaries on national culture.

Vitier's poetic discourse was clearly marked by the political crisis of the 1950s in Cuba: what he called "a period of historical closure" (p. 9)—the end of the Batista dictatorship and the beginnings of the Cuban Revolution. Faced with the illegitimacy of the established government, Vitier attempts to rescue the country's dignity on moral and aesthetic grounds. In this regard, he shares the artistic vision of the literary journal Orígenes, founded in 1944 by the poet José Lezama Lima. The intellectuals grouped around Orígenes were profoundly disillusioned with the failure of the anti-Machado movement to renovate Cuban politics and the installation of Batista's dictatorship. Hence, Vitier's adamant rejection of a psychological or sociological method is a way of asserting the cultural autonomy of the literary sphere. Vitier uncovers a series of discursive practices, rhetorical formulae, and literary tropes that have encoded the idea of national identity in Cuba over time. From Heredia's nostalgic recreation of his homeland, through Marti's well-developed Creole consciousness, to Guillén's poetics of racial and cultural mixture, a particular way of articulating lo cubano has become institutionalized and canonized by literary critics such as Vitier.

Vitier's approach to national identity raises several issues. First, he assumes that literature mirrors the development of an ideological consciousness among Cubans in general, not just the intellectual elite. (Most of the poets cited were white men from privileged social backgrounds.) It remains to be shown to what extent Cuba's popular classes shared or resisted the dominant discourse of the upper classes. Second, Vitier's culturalist and idealist slant overlooks the myriad connections between poetry and politics, broadly conceived as the struggle for power in all forms of social relations, including the power to write and define Cubanness. A more open attitude toward the sociology of literature would probably have thrown light on the interaction between the poetic texts and their historical

contexts, such as colonialism and neocolonialism. Finally, *Lo cubano en la poesía* presents an overly disembodied, almost Platonic, portrait of Cubanness. Ultimately, Vitier's "search for our insular essences through poetry" (p. 572) is doomed to fail, because such "essences," if they actually exist, always assume concrete institutional forms in specific historical junctures.

Despite its limitations, *Lo cubano en la poesía* has become a classic statement of the nationalist canon in Cuban culture. By consecrating the major authors and texts of the Island's vast poetic production, Vitier follows a time-honored tradition in literary criticism of focusing on certain forms of writing deemed representative of a country's national identity. For instance, his list of great Cuban poets practically excludes women writers from the canon and relegates Afro-Cuban authors to a secondary place. Similarly, although he mentions popular oral traditions, he clearly prefers literary texts. Moreover, *Lo cubano en la poesía* advances an ethic as well as an aesthetic world view. Its lyrical attempt to develop an intimate harmony between the Island's landscape and the writer's inner state is more than a poetic judgement; it is a political program that Vitier has elaborated elsewhere. Lastly, Vitier's caveat that Cubanness cannot be defined by telluric forces because the country is not part of a continental land mass like other countries of Latin America (p. 580) is relevant to my argument here. Nevertheless, it is the terrestrial representation of Cuba that has become a dominant part of nationalist thought.

**The Sugar Plantation as a Master Metaphor**

With the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the nationalist discourse on the Island experienced profound ruptures as well as surprising continuities. Whereas Vitier wrote pessimistically about Cuban society on the verge of Fidel Castro's entry into Havana, Manuel

---


Moreno Fraginals published the first volume of his historical masterpiece, *El ingenio*, during the effervescent 1960s. Moreno Fraginals explicitly acknowledges his debt to the revolutionary government in supporting his research and granting access to archival sources of information. Contrary to prior culturalist or psychological analyses, Moreno Fraginals privileges the economic and technological bases of Cuban identity. *El ingenio* quickly became the classical text of a certain kind of Marxist historiography, closely identified with the Cuban Revolution, even though it was somewhat unorthodox in its theoretical framework and research methods. At any rate, the author’s overwhelming stress on the productive structure and the class struggle tends to coincide with the socialist ideology officially adopted by Castro’s government in 1961. Beyond the details of its argument, the book tells the narrative of the linear progress in Cuban history that Marxism-Leninism promoted in politics: from precapitalist to capitalist and, eventually, socialist society.

Unlike most prerevolutionary scholars, Moreno Fraginals gives most weight to material forces in his discourse on national identity in Cuba. He underlines the development of the labor force, the occupation of the land, the accumulation of capital, and the development of technology. Together, these factors constituted the economic infrastructure of Cuban society between 1760 and 1860, then organized around the slave plantation. In turn, the predominance of the sugar industry determined the ideological superstructure of the ruling class: the Creole sacarocracy or sugar elite, especially in Havana. Paradoxically, this class was split between its hegemonic vocation as a liberal bourgeoisie and its economic dependence on slave labor and a metropolitan market. Under such conditions, the nationalist ideology of the dominant groups--at least in the political sphere--was severely curtailed.

Moreno Fraginals’s economic and technological determinism was inspired by historical materialism, as it was imported and adapted to Revolutionary Cuba during the 1960s. For instance, he insists that the socioeconomic complex of the sugar mill restructured

---

the social relations and cultural practices of the Cuban nation during the nineteenth century. Other postrevolutionary scholars have followed his lead, notably the anthropologist Miguel Barnet, who went so far as to claim that sugar had created Cuban culture. In some ways, Moreno Fraginals simply extends the central paradigm in Caribbean studies—the plantation framework—to Cuban history. In other ways, his analysis of Cuba’s colonial period under Spain is more original because it is framed by the contemporary experience of a socialist experiment. Just as Cuba had become a slave plantation economy during the nineteenth century, which transformed the Island’s entire society, so too it would become a new society in the twentieth century by abolishing capitalism altogether. Although El ingenio never reaches the contemporary period, it constantly prefigures the Cuban Revolution and provides a retrospective reading of the past that gave meaning to the present.

Moreno Fraginals’s analysis is especially insightful when exploring the interconnections between practical economic activities and the “intellectual adventure” represented by the sugar mill. Thus, he shows how the expansion of the sugar industry in Cuba fostered a bourgeois ideology, scientific research, modern technology, and even a growing gulf between Creoles and peninsulars. As a result, the local sacarocracy elaborated a coherent discourse on Cuban identity that represented its own class interests as synonymous with those of the entire nation. Unwittingly, Moreno Fraginals follows this logic in organizing his own historical narrative around the sugar mill as the master concept for Cuban identity. In his account, sugar not only shaped the Island’s physical and cultural landscape as we now know it; it actually integrated the Cuban territory through an extended network of roads and railroads. Sugar also molded race relations, class conflicts, political ideas, literary movements, forms of property, urban spaces, and practically every other aspect of national culture.

---


41 The recent essay by Consuelo Naranjo Orovio and Armando García González, Racismo e inmigración en Cuba en el siglo XIX (Aranjuez: Doce Calles, 1996), documents the racial bias inherent in the dominant discourse on national identity in Cuba.
Moreno Fraginals’s text is marred by two conceptual problems common to traditional Marxist scholarship: on the one hand, economic determinism and reductionism, and, on the other, an acute dichotomy between the material infrastructure and the ideological superstructure. With respect to the first issue, Moreno Fraginals is fascinated with the technical details of sugar production, such as different types of mills, varieties of cane, modes of cultivation, and manufacturing processes. But he pays much less attention to the transformation of collective mentalities, ideological representations, or cultural identities that accompanied the sugar revolution in Cuba, because these are assumed to derive from the material infrastructure. And herein lies the second major limitation of his argument: the belief that economic and technological processes can be clearly separated from cultural and ideological ones. Recent developments in Marxist and post-Marxist thinking have questioned the philosophical division between matter and spirit that permeates historical materialism.42

The materialist turn in Cuba’s nationalist discourse (as represented here by Moreno Fraginals) coexists uneasily with the idealist tradition (exemplified by Vitier, Mañach, and others). At least initially, the Cuban Revolution favored the first approach to national identity, but the second has survived until today. Regardless of their differences, both approaches take for granted the objective existence of Cubanness. For Moreno Fraginals, the definition of national identity must be sought in the context of class struggle and the dominant relations of production at a given point in time. For Vitier, the essence of lo cubano is a persistent way of feeling and perceiving the world that does not necessarily flow from social and political circumstances but from past mental structures. The capacity of the Cuban Revolution to absorb the two viewpoints attests to its idiosyncratic and syncretic nature. It is eerie to note that the materialist, Moreno Fraginals, has recently migrated to Florida, while Vitier, the idealist, has remained active in Cuba. Moreno Fraginals is currently

42 See especially the work of Stuart Hall cited earlier.
working on historical issues pertaining to the Cuban diaspora, a topic that his prior research had all but ignored.43

Between and Betwixt Two Nations

Despite the nationalists' proverbial neglect, the Cuban diaspora has produced its own interpretations of how cultural identity is preserved and transformed outside the Island. Nearly four decades of constant emigration to the United States have begun to question the Island-centered canon of lo cubano.44 In some ways, Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's Life on the Hyphen45 represents a radical departure from the nationalist discourse on Cuban identity in focusing on the diaspora and thereby decentering the Island. In other ways, Pérez-Firmat continues a long tradition within Cuban nationalism, which takes displacement and dispersion as central experiences of the Cuban nation since the end of the eighteenth century. In any case, the author has pushed the classic image of the ajiaco to its logical extreme by insisting that contemporary Cuban-American culture represents the latest phase in the intense interbreeding of impure sources, particularly in popular music and creative literature. In Cuban Miami, the ajiaco has become a tropical soup (p. 16).

Pérez-Firmat's intellectual project clearly responds to a personal and political agenda: to legitimize the hybrid cultural borderlands inhabited by Cuban émigrés in the United

43 See Manuel Moreno Fraginals, La historia como arma y otros estudios sobre esclavos, ingenios y plantaciones (Barcelona: Crítica, 1983), and his more recent Cuba/España, España/Cuba: historia común (Barcelona: Crítica, 1995) to examine the development in his political thought. For a provocative comparison of Moreno Fraginals with Cuban exile historian León Marrero, see Javier Figueroa, “Cuatro historiadores cubanos en busca de una nación (Ramiro Guerra, Jorge Ibarra, León Marrero y Manuel Moreno Fraginals)” (paper presented at the XIX International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Washington, D.C., September 28-30, 1995).

44 Recent thinking on the subject was sampled at the Second South Florida Symposium on Cuba, organized by the Cuban Studies Association, devoted to “Exiles, Émigrés, and Expatriates: Cuban National Identity in the Diaspora,” Miami, Florida, September 13-14, 1997.

States. The book is primarily concerned with the so-called 1.5 generation of Cuban-Americans—those born in Cuba but raised in the United States—, performers and writers like Desi Arnaz, Gloria Estefan, Willie Chirino, Cristina García, and the author himself. The guiding metaphor of "life on the hyphen," which Pérez-Firmat uses to describe the blending of Cuban and American cultures, transgresses the territorial and ideological borders of the Cuban (as well as the American) nation. At the same time, the author's redefinition of hyphenation avoids the negative connotations of straight-line assimilation theory, which predicted that second- and third-generation immigrants would be absorbed by the receiving culture and lose their ancestral "roots." In his perspective, Cuban immigrants have undergone three distinct phases in settling down in the United States—from substitution to destitution and institution—but they have not assimilated completely in the standard sense of the term.

According to Pérez-Firmat, the Cubans' adaptation to the United States has entailed a fertile crossover, a successful attempt to balance Cuban and American traditions through what he prefers to call "biculturation" rather than acculturation or transculturation. In his view, the relationship between the two cultures is not oppositional but appositional, insofar as neither establishes a hegemony over the other. Although this claim sounds utopian, given the strong pressures to become Americanized, Cuban immigration and settlement in the United States have culminated the "tradition of translation" present in Cuban culture from its beginnings. Following Ortiz, Pérez-Firmat argues that Cuban culture lacks a strong, stable core and is better defined by its ongoing hybridization. Consequently, the development of Cuban-American culture does not mean the denaturalization of a putative

---

46 For biographical details on Pérez-Firmat, see his Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America (New York: Anchor, 1995). I should add that I, too, feel identified with this project as yet another member of the 1.5 generation of Cuban immigrants in the United States and Puerto Rico. What kind of political ideology and organization this project would assume is the topic for another essay.

essence, but the ultimate expression of crossing over. In the last analysis, it is inappropriate to speak about deradication or deculturation to describe Cuban-Americans, at least the members of the 1.5 generation. As Pérez-Firmat jokes, "we Cubans have a peculiar relation to our roots: we eat them" (p. 16). In his satiric way, Pérez-Firmat has contributed to a nonessentialist and poststructuralist approach to Cuban identity, allowing one to rethink the connection between the Island and the diaspora from a more fluid and flexible perspective. Nonetheless, his proposal leaves several problems unresolved.

One of the main issues is how the Cuban "tradition of translation" changes outside the homeland. Pérez-Firmat seems to believe that Cuban émigrés continue to think and write like Cubans in America, rather than Americans of Cuban origin, and that their physical displacement does not produce a significant cultural dislocation. Moreover, *Life on the Hyphen* does not place sufficient emphasis on the ruptures between Cuban-Americans before and after 1959, nor the fissures within the exile community today. However, comparing the narrative and poetic texts of Oscar Hijuelos and José Kozer suggests that biculturation differs substantially for self-perceived immigrants and expatriates. For Pérez-Firmat, being Cuban and Cuban-American are compatible propositions (p. 81). But this statement neglects a long-standing current within Cuban nationalism, which tends to define lo cubano precisely as what is not americano. Pérez-Firmat has painted an overly rosy picture of the ideological reconciliation between two collective mentalities and cultural representations with a tense, if not antagonistic, relation for at least one hundred years. From the Island's point of view, that relation became more problematic since 1959 and even more hostile in the 1990s.

---

48 For a recent theoretical development of the concept of hybridization, see Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1990).

Life on the hyphen—like the "city on the edge" coined by Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick⁵⁰—is an apt image for the between and betwixt position of Cuban-American culture. Dwelling on the liminal and interstitial situation of migrants like Cubans in Miami resonates with a growing literature on transnational communities and diasporic identities.⁵¹ Pérez-Firmat's attempt to locate Cuban-American culture within the hybrid space of Miami forms part of a wider scholarly interest in transcending physical, political, and intellectual boundaries. Furthermore, his essay should be read against the grain of U.S.-Cuban relations and incipient efforts to overcome the ideological blockade between the two countries. Although it was probably not the author's original intention, Life on the Hyphen has helped to open up a productive dialogue between writers, artists, and scholars from Cuba and the diaspora about the meaning of national identity in an increasingly transnational world. Many intellectuals now use it as a pre-text to debate and update their views of lo cubano.⁵²

Bridging Cuba and the United States

The final and most recent piece in this overview of lo cubano is Ruth Behar and Juan León's edited volume, Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba.⁵³ This eclectic collection includes academic essays, personal memoirs, poems, drawings, photographs, fragments of novels, and book reviews by authors currently residing in the United States, Cuba, and elsewhere. The

⁵⁰ Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).


⁵³ Ruth Behar and Juan León, eds., Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba (first issued as a special double issue of the Michigan Quarterly Review 33, 3-4 [1994]; second edition, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).
volume gathers about 60 intellectuals and writers on and off the Island in one of the most inclusive anthologies on Cuba's identity crisis during the 1990s. Many of the authors are women writing about the relationship between gender and nationality, a topic neglected by previous attempts at defining lo cubano. Most of them belong to what Pérez-Firmat called the 1.5 generation of Cuban immigrants in the United States; those still living in Cuba were born mostly after 1959. So, although geographically and sometimes ideologically separated, most of the authors are chronologically part of the same generation of revolutionaries and exiles.

_Bridges to Cuba_ not only transcends geopolitical frontiers, but disciplinary ones as well. The collection overcomes the traditional barriers between the humanities and the social sciences by sampling the work of poets, novelists, artists, literary critics, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and others. Conventional political categories such as "the right" and "the left" are rendered unstable by the current reshuffling among orthodox nationalists, Marxists, liberals, conservatives, and other labels in Cuba and abroad. The artificial dichotomy between Cuban culture on the Island and in exile is subverted by the constant flow of people and ideas across geopolitical borders. Finally, the juxtaposition of texts from this side and the other in the same collection suggests that Cuban identity has moved well beyond the confines of the insular territory. In particular, the sons and daughters of Cuban immigrants in the United States are remapping the symbolic boundaries of the Cuban nation. Whether Cuban-Americans will continue to see themselves as part of Cuba or the United States is open to question, but their preservation of a strong sense of lo cubano is not.

The bridging metaphor organizes a good part of the collective reflection on the cultural and emotional ties between the Island and the diaspora. Behar and León conceive the bridge as an open space for dialogue and reconciliation above and beyond the geographic and ideological differences imposed by the Cold War. They also extend their image to the

---

54 Earlier attempts to combine representatives from both the Island and the diaspora include a literary anthology, Edmundo Desnoes, ed., _Los dispositivos en la flor. Cuba: literatura desde la revolución_ (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1981); a wider range of people are sampled in Lynn Geldof, _Cubans: Voices of Change_ (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991). More recently, the literary journal _Encontro de la cultura cubana_, published in Spain, has also attempted to bridge the gap between Cubans on and off the Island.
relations between Cubans and other diasporic communities, such as African-Americans, Jews, and Latinos in the United States. Some bridges are attempted between Cuban immigrants and “progressive” groups in the United States and Latin America. But bridges can be divisive as well as connecting structures, and this anthology represents a limited repertoire of opinion both in Cuba and the United States. Most of the authors can be characterized as moderate or left-of-center because they support a wide-ranging dialogue between those who left and those who stayed in Cuba. This remains one of the points of highest contention within the Cuban-American community and in Cuba itself.

Throughout, *Bridges to Cuba*—especially in its second part—emphasizes the hybrid, syncretic, and diasporic texture of contemporary Cuban culture on both shores of the Atlantic. In this sense, the collection has contributed to refiguring national identity as a cultural space with no fixed, stable, and impermeable borders. Bridging the gap between Cuba and the United States, many of the authors have themselves developed dual or even multiple allegiances, including the coeditor, Behar, who defines herself as a Jewish, Cuban, and American feminist; Ester Rebeca Shapiro Rok, a Jewish Cuban-American of Polish and Russian origins; Alan West, who was born in Cuba of an American father and grew up in Puerto Rico; and Flavio Risech, a Cuban-American gay activist. Connecting their Cuban pasts with their American present has often meant a personal journey back to their nation of origin and, then, a return to their current lives. Collectively, the authors’ experiences and positions recreate the internal diversity of the Cuban diaspora, especially along the lines of gender, sexual orientation, political ideology, place of residence, and, less frequently, race.


Among the most moving personal testimonies of returning to Cuba are those by María de los Ángeles Torres, María Teresa Marrero, Coco Fusco, Patricia Boero, and Cristina García. More academic analyses of the experience may be found in the essays by Flavio Risech, Eliana S. Rivero, Juan León, Lillian Manzor-Coats, and Ruth Behar. Behar has also recently included a lucid chapter on going back to Cuba in *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks your Heart* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).
and class. As a result, national identity emerges in all its complexity and heterogeneity, irreducible to a straightforward formula of *lo cubano*.

Behar and León’s compilation contains numerous transnational narratives tracing the construction and reconstruction of Cuban identity beyond a fixed locale. Oftentimes, these narratives reveal the process of ideological disenchantment from the political extremes of the Cuban community in Miami as well as in Havana. To many of their authors, Miami’s Cuban enclave appears as an island away from the Island, a place surrounded by walls of political intolerance. But Cuba is also seen as a constrained ideological space that represses dissidence and allows very little diversity. Building bridges to Cuba and back therefore involves moving away from the closed positions of both the right and left, which define the Cuban nation in equally exclusive terms. From the viewpoint of the Cuban government, those who left “abandoned” their country and ceased being part of the “imagined community.” For the dominant sector of the exile community, *el son se fue de Cuba*: even the musical symbol of the Cuban nation left the Island. For most of the contributors to this collection, Cuban identity resides both in Cuba and in the diaspora, insofar as the migrants took their culture abroad and recreated it there, especially in Little Havana.

In synthesis, *Bridges to Cuba* proposes that the formation and transformation of *lo cubano* must be approached from a deterritorialized, transnational perspective. Although Behar use the telluric language of roots, she does not advance it as the master metaphor for reconnecting Cuban immigrants to their native country. Instead, the dominant image of a bridge—or better still, bridges, in the plural—suggests that the bounded lands (the Island and the U.S. mainland) on either side are not as self-contained as they seem. Moreover, substituting a constructed figure like a built structure for a natural phenomenon like roots emphasizes the role of human invention and imagination in cultural identities. *Bridges to Cuba* has undermined popular stereotypes of Cuban exiles and revolutionaries, denying the possibility of characterizing either as immutable essences. And, finally, it has demonstrated the need to incorporate the diaspora in any discussion of contemporary Cuba, and vice versa.
For, as David Rieff\(^5\) has argued only slightly hyperbolically, Cuba lives in the heart of Miami, just as Miami lives in the heart of Cuba.

**Conclusion**

As in other places, nationalist discourse has long attempted to fix the essence of Cubanness according to territorial, historical, economic, cultural, or psychological criteria. Since 1959, it has also excluded certain political ideas and movements from its definition of the nation. The search for a unique cultural identity has been one of the recurrent themes of the social sciences and the humanities in Cuba throughout the twentieth century.\(^58\) For Cuban nationalists—both politicians and intellectuals—the United States has commonly meant “the other:” the cultural outsider against which Cuba was imagined, measured, contrasted, and protected. Regardless of their political persuasion, Cuban nationalists have sought to distinguish their identity from that of their all-too-near neighbor to the north.\(^59\)

One of the results of this mental operation has been the exclusion of the diaspora from any serious reflection on the Cuban nation. Ironically, many of the cultural values and practices defended by Cuban nationalists were first identified and coded in exile. But the diaspora was too close, physically, metaphorically, and ideologically, to the United States.\(^60\) Cuban nationalists tended to identify the insular territory as an essential component of their identity, as opposed to the U.S. mainland.

Various master images have organized the discussion on Cuban identity since the beginning of this century, among them Mañach’s *choteo*, Ortiz’s *ajiaco*, Vitier’s *lo cubano*,

---


59 Louis Pérez, “So Near and Yet So Foreign.”

Moreno Fraginals' _ingenio_, and now Pérez-Firmat's hyphen and Behar's bridges. Future researchers should document more thoroughly the connections between these literary texts and their historical contexts. Here I can only suggest that their authors have employed powerful metaphors to articulate various intellectual fads, such as psychologism, culturalism, idealism, materialism, and postmodernism. The texts were also produced at different economic and political junctures, which clearly shaped their authors' thinking and writing. Cuba's recurrent crises—especially in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1990s—have periodically renewed the intellectuals' reflection on national identity. Furthermore, the last two texts were originally published in English and outside the Island, already a significant departure from the established canon. But collectively the essays reveal a striking continuity in the framework of nationalist ideology in Cuba and elsewhere. Above all, I have underlined the discursive silence about the diaspora and the rhetoric of roots to describe the formation and transformation of cultural identities.

The more recent images of the hyphen and the bridge offer a new take on _lo cubano_, from the transnational outlook of the diaspora. Both metaphors shift the focus away from the conventional representation of identity as a fixed and immutable substance that cannot "set roots" outside the native soil. Both point at the possibility of reconnecting the dispersed landscapes of the Cuban nation beyond the Island. Today, a hyphenated Cuban-American culture flourishes along the interstices between Havana and Miami, above the airbridge that connects the two spiritual centers of _lo cubano_. Perhaps, as Cintio Vitier argued nearly four decades ago, the most appropriate metaphor for Cuban identity is aerial or marine rather than terrestrial. The migratory bridges between Cuba and the United States have certainly been by air and by sea, as shown by the so-called Freedom Flights between 1965 and 1973 and the 1994 _balsero_ crisis that brought thousands of Cubans to the United States.

Inscribing the Cuban-American community within the project of constructing and reconstructing national identity in Cuba has far-reaching repercussions. On the one hand, it expands and, at the same time, subverts the conventional terms of nationalist thought and practice, both left- and right-wing. Recovering _lo cubano_ within the diaspora forces one to transcend the insular territory, the juridical definitions of citizenship and nationality, the traditional postures of political ideology, and even the standard opposition between Spanish
and English. On the other hand, the rhetoric of roots must be revised, if not discarded altogether, when revisiting national identity in Cuba and the diaspora. A more porous, liquid, or aquatic imagery is more attuned to the constant cultural flows and border crossings of every kind that lie at the center of a transnational world. Perhaps, as Damián Fernández has suggested, an amphibious metaphor could help to soften the tensions between the aerial and the terrestrial, the marine and the telluric, in thinking about the nation. Less essentialist and more fluid discourses of national identity are called for on the eve of the twenty-first century, when the two main fragments of the Cuban people will hopefully reconcile with each other.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jorge Duany is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras, and Director of the Revista de Ciencias Sociales. His main research interests include Caribbean migration, ethnic identity, popular culture, and the underground economy. He is the author of Cubans in Puerto Rico: Ethnic Economy and Cultural Identity, El Barrio Gandul: economía subterránea y migración indocumentada en Puerto Rico, the articles "Imagining the Puerto Rican Nation," and "De lo afrocubano a la salsa: géneros musicales de Cuba" and was editor of Los Dominicanos en Puerto Rico: migración en la semi-periferia.

CUBAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

The Cuban Studies Association (CSA) is an academic organization that seeks to promote the scholarly, multi-disciplinary study of Cuba and Cuba-related topics. The CSA was founded in 1995 by graduate students, staff, faculty, and alumni from the University of Miami community. The CSA is affiliated with the University’s Graduate School of International Studies.

The CSA has chosen to work towards this goal through the following efforts:

- Sponsorship of lectures, workshops, films, and conferences;
- Publication of a multi-disciplinary Occasional Paper Series (OPS);
- Annual conference to highlight a major theme of interest of the CSA membership and the public policy community; and
- Support acquisition, maintenance, and/or restoration of historical, cultural, and archival materials relating to Cuba in conjunction with the Amigos of the Cuban Collection of the University of Miami Richter Library.

For more information on the OPS:

- Cuban Studies Association
  - P.O. Box 432714
  - Miami, FL 33243
  - Tel. 305/284-4303
  - Fax. 305/284-4406
  - E-Mail: csaum@umiami.ir.miami.edu