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GEOGRAPHIES OF IDENTITY IN CUBAN AMERICAN NARRATIVE

ANTONIA DOMÍNGUEZ MIGUELA

The second half of the twentieth century has been flogged by civil clashes in countries where concepts like *nation*, *homeland*, *citizenship* and *state* are being called into question. Besides, increasing migratory trends have transformed countries such as the United States where there are more and more individuals who wonder about their place in the world and about the validity of social, cultural and political concepts on which their identity used to rest. After the exile, a redefinition of the aforementioned concepts can be observed in Cuban American narrative works such as the novels by Roberto Fernández and Cristina García.

This revision of concepts related to culture, homeland and national identity is especially relevant in Cuban American literature since it is carried out by a group of people who share a fundamental characteristic: the distance from a native land which is the source of great part of their cultural heritage. Furthermore, the geographical element, that is, the real referent of a country or state with geographical limits is going to be an axiomatic element in this process of redefinition of Cuban American identity as it is reflected in the production of literary spaces.

In an epoch where we contemplate impassively how technological and communication advances occur dizzily up to the point of transforming our lives and when we are witnesses of movements of population increasingly important and of undeniable consequences, it is not strange that in a country as multicultural as the United States there are individuals who wonder about their place in the world and about the validity of social, cultural and political beliefs which have been part of a collective identity and their point of reference. I would like to demonstrate that due to very particular political and historical circumstances, in Cuban American narrative a redefinition of the concepts afore mentioned is also taking place. Cuban American narrative exemplifies social, political and cultural conflicts that the critical eye of the artist/writer will inevitably have to face in the future.

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Latino immigrant literature in the United States is without doubt a privileged place to observe this redefinition of the concepts of *culture*, *homeland* and *national identity* since it is carried out by a group of people who share a fundamental characteristic: the distance from a native land which is the source of great part of their cultural heritage. In fact, the geographical element, that is, the real referent of a country or state with geographical limits is going to be a fundamental element in the redefinition that we have mentioned and it is directly reflected in the creation of literary spaces in Latino/a narrative. Nevertheless, it is necessary not to fall down in the dangerous habit of generalizing on the experience of almost forty millions of Latin people in the United States. It is necessary to respect in every group not only their similarities with other Latino groups, but also the differences that make their vision of both worlds and cultures unique. To achieve this, it turns out to be much more efficient to focus on a group of Cuban American writers whose experience is already complex enough due to the long history of troubled relations between Cuba and the United States throughout the twentieth century.

Cuban American narrative questions the idea that to be a Cuban it is necessary to reside in Cuba and much less when where one resides is a country as multicultural as the United States. Different forms of Cuban culture are developing in more than one geographical space. The deterritorialization of the concepts of nation and culture as a consequence of exile and migration is clearly reflected and represented in Cuban American literature where the geographical limits that determine the concept of national and cultural Cuban identity are challenged. In this literature the geographical spaces become fundamental prominent figures in the life of the protagonists up to the point of making that very conflict and dialogue between both spaces an existential in-between space that does not correspond necessarily with a geographical location but with a heap of cultural experiences that define the person and therefore constitute plots of a fluid identity in constant come and go.

The Cuban case is especially delicate because in Cuba politics get confused with the national identity to such an extent that the Cuban government has traditionally accused exiles of being anti-Cuban, unworthy of the Cuban nationality. The political area is an extremely unstable one since ideology does not often serve the nation but the political condition it supports. Therefore, this ideology excludes any other political feasible ideology within the geographical limits of the nation-state. We might say that in the Cuban case an institutionalization of the relation between state and nation takes place or in other words, the idea of nation is manipulated to the service of politics.

Cuban American narrative suggests, every time with more and more insistence, the appearance of a new concept of *cubanidad* and therefore of national identity. Though it may seem contradictory, the majority of Cuban Americans identify with the adjective *Cuban* without giving second thought to the fact that, especially with the new generations, they have never trodden on the island. They identify with an idea of *cultural nation* and not with that of official nationality or citizenship. Along the last two decades and as the exiled population was realizing

that their permanence in the United States might be indefinite, this construction of a cultural identity that defies the geopolitical limits of the state and of national Cuban identity has developed with more force, but not without manifest restlessness in this narrative as we will observe.

Paraphrasing Paul Tabori, the exile is someone who inhabits a place but who remembers or projects the reality of another place. This appraisal is surprisingly true in the case of Cubans from Miami, which has become a postmodern space created out of the panting desire of the exile as a victim of the deterritorialization of his/her cultural identity. María Cristina García describes this situation in *Havana USA*:

While the Cuban's original goal may have been to preserve Cuban culture on American soil until they could return to their homeland, over time they have produced a uniquely Cuban American culture. Recent arrivals from Cuba joke that arriving in Miami is like stepping back in time into the Cuba of the 1950s. All around are visible reminders of pre-revolutionary Cuban society: schools, businesses, and organizations that shut down in Cuba reopened in exile. (4)

In this moment it is necessary to mention that the Cuban literature of exile is the one that answers in literary form to this desire which spread out mainly in the decades of the 60s and 70s. The literary spaces that we find in the first Cuban narratives of exile always present a panorama of opposition between both spaces: that of the pre-revolutionary Cuba and that of the exile in North-America where the nostalgia and the lament for the lost homeland prevails considerably. That is the case of innumerable works mostly written in Spanish as in the case of Esteban J. Palaces Holes, Celedonio González or Antonio Benítez Rojo. A very resentful critique towards the present situation can also be observed among these works, especially in the case of Benítez-Rojo, later in Margarita Engle or even in Reinaldo Arenas, one of the intellectuals who was obliged to leave the island together with the *marielitos*.¹ Pablo Medina's work can serve us as a link between this eminently nostalgic literature of exile; a literature that little by little comes closer to the emigrant experience of the Cuban who begins resigning to a permanent stay in the United States. In *Exiled Memories*, Medina already presents us the development from a Caribbean conscience founded on an idyllic vision of the island to the experience of the emigrant who must learn to live among the hostilities he/she comes across in US society. Nevertheless, we can consider Medina's work among the last that still raise a bucolic idea in the past of the island since the narrative that comes after him will progressively call to question the partiality that had prevailed in the narrative treatment of both spaces.

This period is followed by a new literary trend that goes away from this literature of nostalgia and past recollections resulting in what we will describe as Cuban American literature. The goal is to overcome a stage in Cuban literature in the United States that, as Gustavo Pérez Firmat painfully admits in *Life on the*

¹ The *marielitos* was the name given to those leaving the island from the Port of Mariel after the Cuban embassy incidents. These working-class exiles were not desirable newcomers for the exile community in Florida nor for the U.S. government who accused Castro of getting rid of "subversive elements" who were mostly black-skinned, poor, ex-convicts or homosexuals.

Hyphen, has to open way to a new concept of *cubanía*. Although his concept of Cuban identity has been used to define a very concrete generation he calls the 1.5 generation, this Cuban identity stops being useful to include the experience of future generations such as that of Cuban-Americans appearing in the works by Virgil Suárez, Cristina García, and Achy Obejas among many others.

Roberto G. Fernández also functions as a link to the new Cuban American narrative since he uses new narrative techniques in clear contrast with what we found in previous works. In *Raining Backwards* (1988) we find again both narrative fundamental spaces that this time are going to act as indispensable instruments of the satire by the author. In this novel Cubans, Cuban Americans, as well as white Americans are victims of the satirical and devouring pen of Fernández. On the one hand the myth of the "Cuba de ayer" is destroyed with its landscapes, streets, buildings which have been reconstructed in the space of Miami or more concretely in Little Havana. Fernández openly criticizes the distorting power of the recollections that with the passage of time have become pure fictions of what is Cuba in the mind of the first-wave exiles. The response that they found to the crisis of identity produced by the dislocation and the separation from the native motherland has been directly compensated with the reconstruction of a cultural past which in some cases belongs to a frozen time and at worst it is simply a product of what in another place I have called *ethnic transcreation* of the collective cultural memory.²

The tragic hue of this situation is not only the irresponsible mythical view of a cultural past which does not even exist in the real space of the post-revolutionary Cuba but that this view is transmitted to the new generations, eager for recovering links with their cultural heritage under the mask of seemingly trustworthy recollections of that collective cultural past. Mirta Vergara, one of protagonists of this work, embodies the exaggeration of this mythical recollection and the main representative of a concept of *cubanidad* in process of extinction or "a vanishing nebula" (Binder 16), as Fernández calls it in an interview. An example of how real spaces are transformed into mere fictions and products of the imagination and of desire is the case of the Varadero beach as it is represented in Mirta Vergara's imaginary world. Mirta Vergara had already appeared in a previous work by Fernández, *La vida es un Special*, a biting critique of the consumerism and the absurdity that surrounds the new exiled Cuban class. This character is a tragic figure who continues dreaming of an imaginary love which is part of a fiction that she has created in order to become her own reality. The appearance of young Eloy reminds her not only of that impossible love through the caresses he grants her in exchange for the recollections that she still preserves on the

² The ethnic transcreation of memories is the process by which the Latino subject reimagines himself/herself by recovering a cultural inheritance transmitted through memories, personal or collective, which are transformed by the experience of migration, exile along the process of transculturation. See my essay on this process in autobiographical narratives by Latinas: "Finding 'Poetic Truth': The Politics of Memory and Ethnic Transcreation in Contemporary Latina Autobiography," 2000.

island. The nostalgic Mirta also narrates and recreates Varadero Beach through a magic-realist look as a symbol of the Cuban paradise left behind where she was longing to enjoy the love of her youth:

... and the white seals came around the Cape of Horn only because they had heard about the pleasures of Varadero, the most beautiful beach in the world . . . but the breezes were never hot and you didn't need suntan lotion and the white seals would play happily with the swimmers and they slid through the falls that surrounded Varadero and when it rained, it rained molasses and rice so you just needed to open your mouth and eat and if you wanted more you just simply said: "Sea creatures, I'm hungry," and the fish and the mollusks would jump from the water to your pan and the sand had the texture of baby powder and the breezes were warm . . . (14)

The idyllic vision of the island is compared with the selective memory and the manipulation of the recollections on the part of many Cubans who have created a reality from a fiction or a "virtual reality" as Humberto Lopez Cruz names it. The instability of such constructions is revealed narratively when Mirta's supposed violation by Eloy is narrated in different ways in three occasions throughout the novel: when she tells Barbarita about the event, when she writes a note to the column of Dr. Kings and the version that Mina receives. Thus the reader begins to distrust the character and therefore her complete reality based on fictions which soothe her impossible desires and her nostalgia.

Little Havana created by a conservative sector of the Cuban community as a substitute of the Havana in the island is clearly compared with Mirta's fictitious reality whose tragic end foresees similar consequences for a generation which is literally lost among its recollections. It is interesting to observe that while we find long physical descriptions of places in the island, Little Havana is not described as any reader could expect. On the contrary, Little Havana is described through the esperpentic experiences of the prominent figures who inhabit it such as Connie Rodríguez and Mima. The character of Mirta, as representative of the first Cuban generations spiritually linked to an island that already does not exist, suggests the need for the reader and for the new generation of Cubans to separate fiction from reality.

One of the fundamental topics that the novel develops is the inability to return to a country that only exists in the character's memory and that until now they considered indispensable to corroborate a cultural identity linked to a national identity established upon a concrete geographical space. To counteract this stance, the narratives created by the new generation of writers reveals the contradictions and inconsistencies of the concept of *cubanidad* that has been perpetuated in North American soil for such a long time. What Roberto Fernández achieves by means of the parody and the satire is what from the unstable terrain of the *mainstream* Oscar Hijuelos had tried in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, though in an exclusively tragic key. Writers like Fernández pose the need to admit a changeable reality that does not need as a referent a geographically distant and unreal space. On the contrary, a reconciliation with the past and the island could help them come to terms with their past in order to survive culturally

and to get adapted to the new situation in American society. Similar to the symbol of raining backwards, which represents death for Miqui's grandmother, the novel *Raining Backwards* represents the elegy of an exile culture succeeded by a new concept of the Cuban identity constructed away from Cuba.

The continuity and the future of the above mentioned identity comes personified in new literary figures as that of the writer Cristina García, generational successor of Roberto G. Fernández. In her novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, García undergoes a project of revision of her cultural heritage and of reconciliation with the geographical space of the island. We must not forget that the first groups of Cuban Americans allowed to return to the island with the Antonio Maceo Brigade belonged to García's generation. The absolute separation of the island that the first generation of emigrés suffered does not appear now to be an obstacle to come to terms with the homeland. For this reason, the temporary return to the island becomes a healing process against the disease of nostalgia that the previous generations had endured. This reunion with the primordial space embodies the foundation and recognition of a new Cuban American identity that allows generational differences but which continues working as an optional cultural identity based on a new concept of *cubanía* wherever the Cuban American individual is.

In *Dreaming in Cuban* reconciliation with a past located in the geographical space of the island takes place. The new generation of Cuban Americans is not still free from the great pressure that the island represents as the space originally tied to their cultural inheritance. The return to the geographical space of the island is also represented narratively through the protagonist Pilar's attempts at meeting her grandmother Celia again, since she stands not only for the island but also for the culture that emerged from it. A constant longing and desire for reunion with the past appears in the first part of the novel. It is a search for a space on which the still unstable new Cuban American identity can rest: "Even though I have been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out. If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged" (58).

In this ambitious project to give voice to both spaces and Cuban experiences, Pilar has the advantage of inhabiting a space we could call neutral such as New York. Two predominant spaces, Cuba and the United States, interact in the novel by means of the different voices and perspectives which represent each space: Celia and aunt Felicia in the island and Lourdes, Pilar's mother, in the United States, among others. The use of multiple perspectives does not facilitate the imposition of just one version of events (as it often occurred in the Cuban literature of exile). Cristina García tries to show how each character has reacted to the tragedy of the dismemberment of the family after the revolution and the exile. The separation has raised questions on the stability of the concept of *cubanidad* that the new generation will have to transform recognizing the role that both spaces have played in the development of the Cuban American identity. *Dreaming in Cuban* represents without any doubt the starting point of a project aimed at restoring the communication with a geographical space to determine

to what extent it has influenced the development of a new Cuban American identity.

Nevertheless, it is in *The Aguero Sisters* where Cristina García definitely manages to reunite both factions of Cuban culture. This second novel proposes a dialogue between both spaces that penetrates into the roots of that separation. This dialogue allows a symbolic reading of the novel where Constanca's search for the truth about her mother's death is nothing but an attempt at understanding the tragedy of the separation that has flogged the Cuban community. Constanca returns again to Cuba because it is in this space where she can find that part that she needs to understand herself and to fill in the void the exile has left. Her sister Reina also comes to meet her since she feels a similar impulse to be reunited with the past and the same desire to be complete through Constanca's fragments complementing her own.

Both sisters represent the reconciliation between two existential spaces and reject on the one hand the fantasized view of the island and on the other hand, the demonizing of the United States. It is thus very significant that Cristina García has chosen two prominent figures from the generation of Pilar's parents. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, it was clear the big differences and obstacles that existed between the exile generation and the following generation of Cuban Americans. In this way, the novel suggests the need to restore the relation between the fundamental spaces of this lost generation of Cubans that Fernández represented as people adrift. According to Cristina García, there is not only the possibility of a reconciliation for this generation whose vital experience was divided between these two fundamental spaces. Furthermore, this reconciliation is strictly necessary for the new generations in order to give the right place to the Cuban culture in their new Cuban American identity already settled in North American soil.

Cristina García's works, as the works by other relevant authors such as Elías Miguel Muñoz, Achy Obejas and Virgil Suárez emerge as the consolidation of the idea that we initially presented and which can also be demonstrated in other Latino narratives by Puerto Ricans, Chicanos/as and Dominicans. The concept of *cubanidad* the new generation of Cuban American writers identifies with is successfully overcoming the limitations that the conflict between the island and the exile created for former generations. Thus, we may easily foresee the development of a new Cuban identity that challenges the influence of political and state institutions being these North American or Cuban.

Cuban American narrative is not only encouraging North-American society to re-define the concept of a North American culture and its relation to the nation-state but it is also challenging Cuban society to rethinking the concept of nation that until now they have defended. In this way what María of the Angeles Torres comments on the reactions of institutions from the island could be equally applied, with necessary contextualizations to those on North American soil:

Political dissenters are considered non-Cubans: exile is their punishment. The challenge posed to this inclusive definition of Cuban identity is, in part, the root of the preoccupation with not allowing culture outside geographic boundaries to be considered "Cuban." To accept that Cuban culture can be created outside its

national borders is to admit that the nation has grown larger than the state boundaries permit. The state has lost control of the nation. (58)

Similarly, we can refer to the policy carried out by the United States regarding the spread of different cultural nations inside the limits of the country and its subsequent reaction enhanced through the politics of multiculturalism, which merely attempts to contain the expansion of cultural nationalisms through the false incorporation of their difference.

As an open conclusion to a problem that in no way I have tried to solve, Cuban American narrative represents an example of an attempt on the part of a number of artists and critics to raise important issues. These issues raise questions such as up to what point national and cultural identity has to be delimited by the geographical borders of a nation and they also suggest the necessity to rethink traditional concepts of nation and homeland in times of great and constant migrations which have provoked a painful uprooting for millions of people all over the world.



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