

In the Land of Mirrors

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Cuban Exile Politics in the United States

María de los Angeles Torres

Ann Arbor

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*In memory of Lourdes Casal, who built the bridge,
and Eliseo Diego, who opened the door.*

*For my daughters,
Alejandra María and Paola Camila Piers-Torres
—may they relish their multiple heritage.*

Definición

Exilio
es vivir donde no existe casa alguna
en la que hayamos sido niños;
donde no hay ratas en los patios
ni almidonadas solteras
tejiendo tras las celosías . . .

Definition

Exile is to live where no house exists
in which we have been children;
where there are no rats in the patio
or unmarried women in starched clothing
knitting behind a trellis . . .

—Lourdes Casal, *Palabras Juntan Revolución* (1981)

El Espejo

Está dormido el espejo
en la noche de verano.
Las sillas, la mesa, el piano,
dan un livido reflejo
como en los sueños de un viejo
las memorias de otros años.
Y el hilo
que va en los paños
iluminando el misterio,
es el rojo farol serio
del tren distante y extraño.

The Mirror

The mirror is sleeping
on a summer evening.
The chairs, the table, the piano,
give off a livid reflection
like the dreams of an old man
the memories of other years.
And the thread that goes through the tapestry
illuminating the mystery,
is the serious red lantern
of the distant and foreign train.

—Eliseo Diego, *Nombrar las Cosas* (1973)

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Illustrations

Entre Miami y La Habana / Between Miami and Havana

Eduardo Aparicio

The portfolio of diptychs in this volume combines images of Cuba (mostly of Havana, taken during my first return visit, in February 1994), and images of the Miami area. The presentation aims to be neither binary nor hierarchical, but rather to invite the viewer to see them as multiple versions of a shared reality. The task of determining at a quick glance what side of the Strait of Florida each image was taken is challenged.

Instead of reinforcing contrasts, these diptychs point to the similarities in two realities that are generally considered opposites. These images question the currency of our national fetishes (the flag, the map of Cuba, the image of José Martí, the image of Che Guevara, the Cuban royal palm) at a time of a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualization of Cuban nationhood, while evidencing the erosion and deterioration of Cuban national iconography, both in Cuba and in Miami.

The first public exhibition of these diptychs was in September 1996, at the gallery Espacio Aglutinador in Havana, curated by Sandra Ceballos.

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Eduardo Aparicio (b. Guanabacoa, Cuba, 1956) is a photographer and writer. He has lived in Miami since 1994.

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Preface

I was born in Cuba and sent to the United States at the age of six. I was one of the fourteen thousand unaccompanied children who came as part of what became known as “Operation Pedro Pan.” Like half of these children, I was reunited with my parents within months. Also like many other Cuban families who came to the United States in the early 1960s, we were relocated to Cleveland, Ohio. Raised outside the closely knit Miami émigré enclave, I was not protected from dehumanizing clashes with racism. These contributed to my search for alternative politics and my desire to return “home.” In the late 1960s and early 1970s I began to meet other Cuban exiles who, like myself, wanted to engage with our homeland. While we were a relatively small group, we managed to find our way back. The Cuban revolution seemed to offer an alternative to the social injustices we were witnessing in the United States. Yet, after years of returning to the island, I became aware of the corruption and abuses of the Cuban government—thus, the search for a perspective that could be critical of both governments. Each stage along the way has involved considerable emotional, political, and intellectual struggle. This book explores these journeys.

My intellectual journey began as a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Lourdes Casal first suggested that I study Cuban exile politics. The chair of the department, however, asked why I would choose such an insignificant voting group. I persisted, despite the graduate program director’s concerns about whether or not a Cuban exile could be “objective” in studying exiles. I do not hide the fact that my perspectives are informed and shaped by events that occurred in my homeland when I was young. My experiences of leaving Cuba in the early 1960s and growing up in the United States at a time of social and political upheaval have greatly marked my views as well.¹ Other waves of Cuban exiles have arrived since the 1960s. My experiences differ from theirs in many ways. Yet there have been similarities in our dislocations; after all, the island has been ruled by one person for four decades, and U.S. policies toward Cuba have been hostile throughout this time.

Although I share points of reference with other Cuban exiles, particularly of my generation, my views are my own. I question the validity of

perspectives that attempt to speak for others, particularly when the “others” have lived in political circumstances in which debate about issues of politics and identity have been difficult. I believe that part of the process of discovering who we are occurs as we enter into dialogue with others around us. This includes our personal narratives as well.²

Still, I am reluctant to give up the quest for theorizing. After all, there may be conceptual tools that can help us understand differences instead of simply generalizing and consequently diluting and distorting experiences.³ This process can begin by elaborating examples of those realities that cannot be placed neatly in one or another of the conceptual categories that dominate our understanding of social reality. Inquiry about human behavior is subjective, precisely because it is done by human beings. Furthermore, if we learn something new about ourselves in the process of inquiry, we ourselves change.⁴ I would add that what has driven me to “observe” and “participate,” and what has in the process changed me as well, has been my commitment to engage in an intellectual struggle particularly around issues that contribute to defining who is entitled to participate in politics.

My method of inquiry is eclectic. Over the past ten years I have systematically interviewed key political actors in the exile community and in Cuba. I have also extensively reviewed government documents available in various libraries as well as those obtained through freedom of information requests. And I have taken notes of my personal involvement in the various political movements referred to throughout the book.

The introduction that follows places this work at the intersection of the personal and the political.⁵ Chapter 1 presents the theoretical concerns of the book. The need for a more comprehensive theoretical and political perspective has grown more urgent in light of the restructuring of the international political economy. Regional blocs such as the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement transcend predetermined political borders. The boundaries of the nation-state no longer define people’s work or life experiences as rigidly as they did during most of the twentieth century. These developments call for new paradigms that explore the changing nature of borders. As such, I situate this study within the broader inquiry of the changing nature of nation-states and its impact on the politics and identity of diaspora communities.

The five chapters that follow are divided roughly by decade. The questions posed take into account the development of Cuban exile politics and identity within a particular place in time, while emphasizing the state structures, institutions, and policies of two warring countries that influenced these processes. Chapter 2 unearths the origins of the postrevolution exile enclave in the 1960s. Chapter 3 looks at the development of the

Cuban community over the 1960s. Chapter 4 traces the pluralization of exile politics in the 1970s, particularly regarding the relationship with the island. It was during this decade that many young exiles, myself included, sought to return home, eventually helping to organize a group of young Cuban exiles who visited the island periodically. Chapter 5 examines the emergence of Cuban-American political action committees in the 1980s, as many Cuban exiles from both sides of the political spectrum turned their attention to Washington, DC. By this time I had joined the board of one of the groups lobbying for changes in U.S.-Cuban relations. Chapter 6 analyzes post-cold war developments and explores a moment that promised to bring reconciliation. Chapter 7 explores the transition of Miami, spurred mainly by the coming of age of a second generation of Cuban-Americans and the arrival of a new wave of exiles. In addition, I discuss the city's significance to Cuban exile politics in general. Chapter 8, which concludes the book, revisits the theoretical issues raised in the first chapter and brings us back to the personal dilemmas that have in many ways served as the catalyst for my writing.

Acknowledgments

This book reflects a journey I began when I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Al Meyer, Peter McDonough, Lourdes Argüelles, and Lourdes Casal made the initial steps possible. The Association for Critical Studies coordinated by Rudy Rosales was a truly exceptional intellectual support group at this stage.

Frank Bonilla, Rebecca Morales, Edwin Melendez, Raul Hinojosa, Andy Torres, and Manuel Pastor, colleagues in the political economy working group of the InterUniversity Program on Latino Research, allowed me to place Cuban exceptionalism in a comparative perspective. It is this group's framework that informs this book.

Marifeli Pérez-Stable's integrity and her own work on the Cuban revolution lay the groundwork for those of us seeking more intellectually honest perspectives on our histories. Carmen Díaz's passion for theoretical and personal coherence and her generosity of spirit helped in our explorations of new theoretical frameworks. And Ruth Behar's insistence that research could be conducted from a more "vulnerable" perspective encouraged me to weave personal narrative into my work.

The work of scholars at the Institute for Policy Studies allowed me to understand the nature of the national security state in the United States, as did the support of Saul Landau, Philip Brenner, and Julia Swieg. Intellectuals I met in Cuba throughout the years, particularly Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Raquel Mendieta, Ivan de la Nuez, and Maruga and Josesito Alegria, have enriched my knowledge of Cuban history and aesthetics.

The Instituto de Estudios Cubanos, headed by María Cristina Herrera, and the Cuban Research Institute of Florida International University, directed by Lisandro Pérez and Uva Clavijo, provided opportunities to present, debate, and receive feedback for a more complex understanding of our realities. Guillermo Grenier shared his surveys throughout the years.

Insights provided by Cuban official documents would not have been possible without the access that Mercedes Arce arranged. My understanding of Cuban politics and identity was enriched through ongoing debates with other colleagues, particularly Rafael Hernández and Abel Prieto.

Some of these exchanges were made possible through the Latin American Studies Association's working groups. Wayne Smith and Andy Zimbalist facilitated these exchanges.

At DePaul my work was supported by the administrations of Dick Meister, Mike Mezey, Larry Bennett, Pat Callahan, and Harry Wray. Other colleagues have provided intellectual and moral support; they include Jim Block, Beth Kelly, Ted Manley, Rose Spalding, Azza Layton, Ted Anton, Felix Masud-Piloto, Maria Masud, Marisa Alicea, and Mirza Gonzalez.

Various editors gave me a public arena in which to debate my points of view, including George Black and Elsa Dixler of the *Nation*, Khachig Tölölyan of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, and Clarence Page of the *Chicago Tribune*. I am especially thankful to Rich Bard of the *Miami Herald*, who gave me the space and support to develop my ideas in a context where it mattered most. Without Chuck Myers of the University of Michigan Press and the criticisms of anonymous reviewers, this book would not have seen the light of day.

The writing of this book would not have been possible without the thoughtful reading and editing provided at different stages by Matthew Piers, Lisa Page, Achy Obejas, Lisa Milam, and Michelle Miller-Adams. I am deeply grateful for their insights, questions, and suggestions. Elizabeth McCormack and Ester Nieves helped research data for the tables for the book. Helena Beckett pulled together last minute details. I am grateful to Eduardo Aparicio whose pictures provide visual testament of our mirror realities.

My first journeys back to the island were made with other Cuban exiles who, like myself, had a desire to reconnect with our homeland. My cotravelers on these early trips, with whom I shared not only the experience but also the struggle to understand our realities, included among many Mariana Gaston, Mauricio Gaston, Miren Uriarte-Gaston, Ana María Garcia, Carlos Muñoz, Raul Alzaga, Ricardo Fraga, Rafael Betancourt, Rosario Moreno, Iraida Lopez, and Armando Garcia. While we have ended up in different places, I am convinced that our returns made possible more complex and richer ways for Cubans on and off the island to engage with one another.

Later on I worked with Manolo Gomez, Ramon Bueno, Silvia Arrom, Dagmariz Cabezas, and Flavio Risech, among others, to provide an alternative voice for Cuban progressives in Washington, D.C. Ramon Cernuda shared with me his understanding of the human rights movement in Cuba and its impact on the exile community.

Liz Balmaseda opened a window into the heart of Miami. And Miami

became more than a transit point thanks to her and Dick and Caren Lobo. Friends from Cuba who later immigrated to the United States, such as Ileana Barros, José Luis Ferrer, Florencio Gelabert, and Madelín Cámara, contributed to making Miami a bit more like Havana.

Throughout the years I have shared anxieties about Cuba and our place in the United States with many friends, including Nereida García, Natalia Delgado, Ricardo Fernández, Coco Fusco, María Bechily, and Rafael Ravelo. Bibiana Suárez, Guillermo Gomez Peña, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Gini Sorrentini, Neri and Luci Barrientos, and Rodrigo del Canto have made me keenly aware that displacement is not only a “Cuban” condition.

My families in Cuba, Pablo Armando Fernández and his wife, Maruja, their children, Jeca, Pepe, Teresa, Pablito, and Barbara, as well as the Diegos, Eliseo, Bella, Rapi, Liche, and Fefe, made the search for coherence possible.

To my parents, Alberto Torres and María Isabel Vigil, who have always insisted on intellectual honesty and who helped with last minute edits on Spanish accents, and to my sisters, Alicia, Lourdes, and Isabel, with whom I have shared both personal and political parts of this journey, I thank for their support.

To my daughters, Alejandra María and Paola Camila, and my husband, Matthew Piers, I owe the joy of being.

A Note on the Photographs

Through images and play on words, Eduardo Aparicio's series *Entre La Habana y Miami* explores similar theoretical and thematic territories as I do in this book. The images raise questions about the staying power of icons and words that have come to be associated with the very essence of the definition of what is Cuban, and as such propose new ways of looking at who we are and who we may become.

His play on words and translations allude to the difficulties in understanding the "Cuban exile" within a narrowly defined linguistic or conceptual paradigm. For example, the word *Entre* in the title of the series connotes both a geographic connection—that is, a place between two points—as well as an intimate personal liaison. *Rastro*, literally a junkyard, also means traces, or those things left behind. *Envios*, which visually refer to the shipments made to island relatives, can also be greetings, ways of reaching out.

For about the first twenty years of exile since the Cuban revolution, separate realities defined our personal and political identities. There were those who stayed and those who left. Havana or Miami. Eduardo's photos challenged the official posture of both governments by bringing together images of seemingly opposite realities in a single aesthetic project. But he does not offer easy solutions to this dilemma, rather he suggests that we need to explore both their commonalities and differences. For instance, *Aqui* (Here) underscores that Cuba, an island in the Caribbean, is still a shared geographic and emotional point of reference. Others suggest that exile undergoes an experiential translation.

These paired images reconfigured the borders of our political identities, thus expanding the possibilities of places we could inhabit. The joint images, as such, no longer provoke a sense of dissonance. They do, rather, create new identities; a public consciousness which includes multiple geographic points of reference.