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INTRODUCTION

PETER READ AND MARIVIC WYNDHAM

‘Latin America’ was the annual study theme of the Australian National University’s Humanities Research Centre for 2002.

A major conference flowing from the theme was ‘The Diaspora of the Latin American Imagination’. Between the fiestas, concerts, festivals and exhibitions of the four-day event were nineteen academic presentations, four of which we are unfortunately not able to reproduce here. All the others, after expert refereeing, are presented here in this first on-line edition of Humanities Research, while six of these have already been published in a print edition, ‘Migrants, Strangers and Purple Bananas (Humanities Research, Vol. X, No. 1, 2003). To introduce our theme, we asked our chief Ambassadorial advocate during the conference planning, His Excellency Dr Abelardo Posso-Serrano, Ambassador of the Republic of Ecuador to the Commonwealth of Australia, to write an introduction to these on-line proceedings. He chose as his theme the focus of the first day of the conference: Human Rights in Latin America.

In choosing the theme of Diaspora, we, the organisers and editors of this volume, first discussed the strengths and weaknesses of what has been carried to Latin America by its many invaders. Later we asked conference contributors: How have these cultural forces meshed with the rich, pre-existing indigenous cultures? What, of these complex transformations, has been exported from Latin America as literature, film, art, political theory? What is the Latin American imagination?

One theoretical dimension of the diaspora is the process known, after Ortiz, as ‘transculturation’. The eminent Cuban historian Alejandro García Alvarez, writing in our volume, regards this as one of the gifts of Latin America to the world: the processes whereby its many civilisations accepted the culture and religions of invaders and transformed them into something local and powerful, yet ever-changing and adaptive. Then the invaders came again, no longer as soldiers and missionaries but as tourists, scholars and artists, to learn from and to absorb that imaginative transformation.

We begin our discussion with Miguel Huezo Mixco’s blazing demand of Salvadoreans, including his fellow artists: Why have they allowed themselves to lie quiescent through volcanoes, earthquakes and civil revolt? Why do they seek relief in Mexico, Havana, Managua, Washington and New York? Even allowing that thinking or doing nothing may grant emotional relief, Miguel demands: shouldn’t we writers, painters and musicians reflect more often about, and in, those places of trauma and grief? Why, he thunders, have Salvadoreans been so impotent in the face of civil or political disaster? The diaspora of the
imagination has been the flight of the Salvadoreans themselves. Quoting the Salvadoran academic Beatriz Cortez, Miguel makes a connection between national forms of violence and a rigid national identity.

Olga Lorenzo pursues the same theme in her probing consideration of the nature of Latin American governance by the caudillo, the generalissimo and the dictator. Humiliation in childhood brings shame, she argues, and the shamed personality remains, in adulthood, anarchic and asocial. Rage is stored within the weakened self to re-emerge in the bullying of others. She cites several nations in which it seems that corrupt, undemocratic or cruel dictators were shaped by an inflexible and unforgiving early education. Perhaps, Olga speculates, the origins of a destructive form of Latin American leadership may lie in the Inquisition, the Islamic invasion and the fortress mentality of the Spanish over many centuries. At any rate, authoritarianism and anarchy are all too often twinned in the same Latin American leader. Olga ponders whether the caudillo-dictator is one of the most regrettable manifestations of the Latin American imagination.

Part of the diaspora, then, is pain, an element emphasised by Peter Read’s discussion of one consequence of enduring exile. For all the moral abdication which, in Miguel Huezo Mixco’s view, emigration may sometimes imply, any kind of permanent departure unties knots which can never again be secured. Peter reflects upon the anguish which intensifies year by year amongst Cuban émigrés as reports worsen on the state of the Colon Cemetery in Havana. How can Cubans carry out the religious and family responsibility of caring for and showing respect for their own dead parents and grandparents? To put it bluntly, they can’t. Peter’s meditation begins in the cemetery’s splendid avenue of national heroes and ends in the sinister shadows of the Tomb of the Reporters to reflect upon the unforeseen concomitant of leaving one’s birthplace, perhaps for ever. The Spanish verb ‘destierro’, uprooted, carries a force which no English word can match.

Meanwhile people are entering, not leaving, Latin America in increasing numbers in search of the fruits of its imagination. They come to Cuba, for example, where Adrian Hearn has been studying how community-based organisations deliver welfare services. In this paper he writes of santería, the form of Afro-Cuban religion practised widely on the island. His insightful diary entries record that the tourists find, perhaps, what they come looking for, but is that the real santería? Indeed, so many are the photographers, the students and the visitors that we can ask if there is any longer a single santería; or rather, is the tension between cultural transformation and cultural resistance so strong as to make the performers of Cuban African religious rites a little schizophrenic as they try to please both visitor and elder? Can the imaginative response survive under such commercial pressures?

The distinguished Cuban historian Alejandro García Alvarez develops the theoretical model of transculturation in his cultural history of the first three decades of the Cuban republic from 1902. The Indigenous, Spanish and African influences sometimes intertwined, sometimes grew in parallel. Dependence on the imperial sugar trade brought artistic and political ideas as well as foreign domination. The very exploitation of the masses and, later, the disillusionment of artists and intellectuals in
the Republic between the World Wars galvanised endeavours, in Alejandro’s analysis, which ‘concretised as one the love of culture and of revolutionary action’. In a complex argument he traces the flowering of *aruaco* (indigenous), *mulato*, Catholic, Spanish and African cultures into a nation which, despite some inadequate or corrupt governments of the period, created a national culture and a powerful imagination. Generously Alejandro concedes that this strong leap of national imagination has remained both inside the island and been exported by the exiles. The artists and intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s gave a significant impulse to the formation of the precious cultural heritage which the Revolution received in January 1959, and which in some form has been carried by the strong emigration that since that date has taken place from the largest island of the Antilles.

Jessica Wyndham also finds reason for optimism in her analysis of the reasons why our own Asia Pacific region should adopt a regional human rights charter following the analogy of the Americas. They, for all the disparity between member nations, produced a charter of rights which predated that of the United Nations itself, a charter further codified in the 1960 Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. By 1969 there existed an American Convention on Human Rights. Some of its members were the first nations in the world to abolish the death penalty, and although not all states subscribe to this ideal, the Convention imposes strict limitations and guidelines on all its members. Though the Americas have a far from unblemished record in human rights, she argues, there is much that our own region can learn from the instruments and systems established in the Americas to protect them.

So far we have swum with the ideas and cultures of the imaginative diaspora. Now it is the turn of the people who take those ideas with them to hold the microphone. In this second part of our introduction we ask: How are Latin Americans who bear the rich fruits of many centuries of transculturation received in the countries to which they emigrate?

The unhappiest experiences are in the country of destination.

Outright rejection can occur in Spain, even though, as Begoña Lobo Abascal cries out in her passionate account, far more Spaniards have settled in Latin America than ever have come from there to Spain. Both populist political parties, and what is claimed to be Spanish popular opinion expressed in the media, trade on easy prejudice and unreasoning anger. Of course, they should begin with the idea that not all intending migrants are the same. Some people Begoña (quoting Bertaux) describes as requesting ‘their own parcel of sovereign power, and who want to share the benefits of the national inheritance’. Others come as refugees (these are some of the people of whom Miguel Huezo Mixco writes) because family or friends have been killed in a political coup or gone into exile; there is nothing left to stay for. Yet whatever their status, Latin Americans seem to be resented far more than immigrants from the European Union who in fact numerically greatly outweigh them. Frequently they are known by the disparaging and all-embracing term ‘sudaca’.

So the experience of most arrivals to Spain is very far from ecstatic greeting. The Colombian Luzmar, interviewed by Begoña, found herself restricted and coerced in having to obtain, with immense difficulty, a work permit. Valentín, from El Salvador, another
interview subject, found the concept of Spain the Mother Country meant in practice nothing. One might as well, he reflects bitterly, have tried to migrate to the United States.

The same disparity of motive divides the Cuban American community in Miami. Marivic Wyndham reflects upon these different waves of Cubans to Miami, the inheritors of some of the cultural transformations which Alejandro García Alvarez described. Cuban émigrés range from the 1959–1960 ‘aristocracy of exile’ of those who left in political or moral protest, to the 1980s Marielitos, many released and ejected by Castro from Cuban jails. Among the many differences between them were that the first waves of the post-Castro diaspora were exiles, that is, they were people who didn’t want to be in the United States, welcoming and familiar though it was to them; they lived for the day when they could return to their beloved island. Now, as their children born in the US become more and more ‘American’, the possibility of return seems much less likely; but the Cuban political and economic diaspora has left a literary, political and linguistic legacy which is now a significant element of the Hispano-USA.

Ignorance about Latin Americans in Australia is infinitely greater than in Spain or the US. Only to a point are the newcomers differentiated by country of origin: Brazilian dances and Cuban bands are chic, and political refugees from Chile and Argentina will find some leftist sympathy. Yet, as in Spain, Latin American intending immigrants, in the eyes of Australian immigration officials, are neither the most desirable migrants (still probably northern European) nor the least desirable (Asian and Middle Eastern).

From the moment of arrival in Australia, our authors report, the Latin American migrant embarks on an unending journey of refashioning a cultural identity.

In the 1970s, people from Thailand, Laos, Vietnam or Cambodia, even Burma or India, tended to be labelled ‘Asians’ by other Australians. Thirty years later we know better and distinguish arriving nationals by their birth country. But Latin Americans in Australia still have much education to impart to their newly found countrymen and women, for Australians remain perhaps more ignorant of Latin American geography than any other of the world’s continents. Officials may not be much better informed. Standing uneasily before the not very sympathetic eye of an Australian immigration official, Gabriela Coronado, the promising young Mexican academic, felt that she was being placed in the box of a potential illegal, a potentially sick person wanting to get free medical treatment, likely to be a political refugee, a traumatised survivor from a dictatorship or from the drug wars. Thus the Australian tendency to lump Latin Americans together not as the derogatory ‘sudacas’ (used in Spain) but as the more neutral ‘South Americans’. Mexicans are bundled in with the rest, as Gabriela notes ruefully in her paper: ‘For Australians, Mexico is in South America, and not in North America as I learned when I was at school’. When she was asked if she was from ‘South America’ she used to respond spontaneously ‘No’. Now she is beginning to answer, after some hesitation, ‘from Mexico’, but she never answers Yes.

From rejection, then, to something better, at the very least, to tolerance. But what should Latin Australians themselves bring to the negotiation of what kind of Australians they are to be? Individual communities must decide how they want to present themselves. Erez Cohen charts the interesting histories of two Adelaide
Latin communities producing their own radio programs on the Special Broadcasting Service Radio bands. The producers of one sought to represent all Latin American interests in Australia as a ‘language community’, the other a much more narrow base of Salvadorean interests. Erez reports that those involved in the first program, ‘Voices’, had to negotiate among themselves to what extent they should represent broad (in practice, left-wing) Latin American interests such as human rights violations or US global capitalism, and, more particularly, whether these issues were of continuing interest to Adelaide listeners even if they were from Latin America.

Meanwhile the other, Salvadorean-interest, radio program labelled its interests as exclusively those of the country of origin. Some of the producers wanted the presentation entirely apolitical, by encouraging, for instance, the broadcast of social messages between Adelaide families. They tried to avoid controversy, which meant that the program soon was criticised for presenting El Salvador (as Erez writes) in an idealised way that avoided mentioning, criticising or explaining the harsh realities of life there. Yet the relationship never remains static: it’s hard to imagine that the Adelaide Salvadorean broadcaster who kept announcing the weather in his birth country would have continued his faraway predictions indefinitely. What, we wonder, would Miguel Huezo Mixco have made of such pronouncements?

From the initial position of ‘Non English Speaking Background’, one may progress in time to the status of ‘Latin America’, even though it’s like a German being labelled a ‘European’. The epithet is of course not chosen by the migrant but — in the absence of any better information — imposed by the surrounding society. So in the midst of negotiating with one’s fellow nationals how to be a Peruvian Australian, or a Chilean Australian, or a Cuban Australian, one is also having to learn, simultaneously, the many meanings of being a Latin American Australian.

All the writers in this section of *Humanities Research* reveal that Latin American migrants never cease to be called upon to reinvent themselves. Crossing borders creates new borders. Wall hangings or colourful handicrafts, regarded here by non-Latins as archetypally ‘Mexican’, may be associated in that country as denoting an indigenous or working-class orientation, or as urban popular culture, or as kitsch, or even as evidence of bad taste. Gabriela Coronado, the now senior Australian academic, has not felt the need to associate closely with other Mexicans; nor would such an association make her feel any closer to her friends back in Mexico. Many of them, in any case, were not born in Mexico at all, her friends are international. Yet Gabriela sends her Mexican-Australian daughters off on school excursions wearing their beautiful peasant caps, their cachuchas — which they probably stuff in their schoolbags as soon as they are out of sight of home.

Food is one way in which other Australians understand points of origin beyond ‘Latin American’. For the first time in her life Gabriela made mole and tortillas, out of the common diaspora tendency, she writes, (perhaps it is almost a requirement!) to show off her Mexicanness. Yet note, as well, an internal imperative. The producers of the Salvadorean radio program organised pupusiadas (parties at which was dispensed the Salvadorean national food), not to impress their friends but because such celebrations came naturally
to them. Most Australian Cubans in their search for familiar foodstuffs seem to have followed that latter principle too. Euridice Charon Cardona found that even Cubans whose houses carried no more obvious an ethnic marker than a fridge-magnet flag would always offer her a Cuban cafecito, perhaps followed by arroz con pollo (chicken and rice). Euridice quotes Ghassan Hage’s point about positive nostalgia, that migrants are better equipped to confront the new life by such practices, which indicate a desire to be Cuban here rather than Cuban there — and certainly not a ‘Latin American’ anywhere. And yet transformations are never fixed. Euridice found that Cubans are keen to include Argentinian barbecued beef and Uruguyan caramel in their new ‘Australian’ diet.

From ‘Non English Speaking Background’ to ‘ethnic’ to Latin American to, finally, Chilean, Venezuelan or Cuban Australian. Penelope Richardson’s intriguing paper demonstrates that the endpoint of the process is not necessarily the disappearance of an original identity and remembered history into a featureless cultural homogeneity. Troubled by her own Australian colonial past, and uncertain how deeply she belonged here, Penelope travelled to Bogotá, Colombia, as an artist. While describing her own artistic journey, she also in her paper follows the parallel trajectory of the Chilean artist Juan Dávila, resident in Melbourne.

Perhaps being an artist imparts a confidence in an essential, sharable humanity, for both Penelope and Juan Dávila threw themselves into the task of interpreting the new cultures in which they found themselves. Each situated themselves as the outside observer who seeks, at least temporarily, to join the artistic conversation. Dávila’s stand was neither Chilean nor Chilean-Australian. Rather he claimed the territory, as Penelope puts it, ‘as an artist and through making a conscious engagement with the new culture he was able to engage this new visual reality and culture without abandoning his Chilean cultural language’. Penelope, analogously, in Bogotá, found herself at first without language and history. Absorbing both her material and cultural milieu, she began to work in the local materials of sugar, coffee and maize; she explored in her work the Colombian issues of indigeneity and slavery. She inserted gold letters into blocks of sugar spelling ‘Blue Blood’, words that played ironically on the history of gold in the pre-Columbian era, and ‘on the political and economic situations in the country that have caused the spilling of blood’. In the same way Dávila commented artistically on refugees, Ned Kelly, football and pies.

Penelope’s expectations as an artist freed her from the usual experiences of Latin Americans as they recall their experiences abroad. Mainstream Australian culture, she argues, situates newcomers as multicultural, and provides special funding to make art about the experience, and so migrant artists are ‘limited (perhaps condemned) to the position of working within the realm of nostalgia …’.

The two issues of Humanities Research are only a step among many towards better understanding of what the process has meant and will continue to mean. How do Latin American communities keep in touch with each other outside the continent itself? Can an imaginative diaspora be thought of as a form of stateless power, as transnationalism, as postcolonial nationalism or as deterritorialised nationalism? In the host countries, the barriers to the diaspora, are
conceptual as well as physical, not only social but intellectual. For the Latin American imagination to be able to find grip in the ever-widening intellectual circles in which it finds itself, it needs first to be recognised and appreciated as a distinct but parallel experience. Regardless of birthplace, all of us need conceptual and analytical tools, intellectual as well as social responsiveness, to bring the Latin American and host cultures into a constructive dialogue. The papers in this exciting volume allow us to advance the journey.

ENDNOTE

In 2002 when we were preparing, with the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University, the seminar on Human Rights and Cultural Expression, it was possible to observe once again the reticence which leads many government officials to try to limit the consideration of human rights to a simplistic study of conventions, protocols and international agreements, without touching on themes which could imply a need to make a value judgement about national compliance with those obligations, accepted voluntarily by the states on subscribing to those conventions, protocols and agreements. Instead it is assumed that they can be examined in a fashion which is isolated from reality.

During many decades, since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the making of those agreements which were made about ‘generations’ of human rights — a concept which is now fortunately superseded — many national authorities have been resisting allowing international examination of their conduct and in that line, the fear of criticism was always present. To avoid this it was thought that there was no alternative but to obscure the national realities and to try to justify violations, great and small, disown any knowledge of atrocities and deny that abuses have been committed.

To this fear of being criticised it is generally possible to associate a profound ignorance by authorities of governments and their representatives of the extent and breadth of human rights. The bureaucracy habitually ignores the existence of an identity, independent of states and governments, of human rights, because their promotion and respect is due to a worldwide current, the same current that grows and strengthens within men and women individually, but not necessarily in governments. Of course, one cannot ignore that in cases where individuals in a society count on the support of their government, the application and protection of human rights is greater, but one cannot forget that in the presence of dictatorships and other antidemocratic and authoritarian regimes, abuses against human rights immediately generate a solidarity of human beings in the whole world, who protest atrocities by dictators and autocrats on behalf of their fellow human beings.
The strategies of governments which are fearful of international criticism, to try to hide or justify violations, are usually impractical and have, on the contrary, effects which are counterproductive to the intentions of abusive governments and their representatives, as the censure and criticism which they fear not only becomes reality, but is magnified as a result of the manoeuvring of the state to deny the existence of violations and atrocities.

In many cases it has been possible to observe that when a successor government, more sensitive and respectful than its predecessor, provides information about the occurrence of violations and atrocities, the international community is given to understand that the new government wishes to rectify its errors. It would be impossible to imagine official cynicism so extreme that atrocities would be published so as to continue committing them.

In the enormous range of application of human rights, which is in a state of permanent growth, the wishes of the fearful states come to nothing, as the advances made by individual human beings, with or without the support of governments, have reached levels which overtake national pigeonholes.

It is possible that, in view of this reality, as a last refuge, fearful governments and their representatives wish to impose limiting criteria, so that only theoretical questions about the universal instruments of human rights are considered, which they pride themselves in having made their own, only formally, not in reality. The analyses that those governments wish to promote, under strict conditions, should adhere strictly to instrumental progress and to academic consideration of the ‘new agreements and pacts on human rights’.

In last year’s Seminar on human rights,1 the Australian National University and some of the people who participated wanted to go further than the pigeonholes and offer a panorama to overcome the fears of the representatives of governments and official entities, and we put forward, with the widest possible breadth, the consideration of human rights as the prime conceptual framework of protection for ‘human expression’, and within them, as the most sublime, the expressions that have to do with culture, with arts and with music.

There was a felicitous coincidence, which can be confirmed on reading the papers presented by the participants in the Seminar, in the belief that human beings exercise a primordial right of their own when they express themselves. It is not possible to find a better example of this, a field more fertile, than that which has to do with the need to protect and safeguard the ‘human conscience’, understood not as a mystical or religious element, but as a natural right of expression, and the corresponding obligation of governments and leaders to respect those manifestations and expressions, all of them, including cultural and artistic expressions, as they form part of the fundamental rights of human beings, and because their expressions are drawn from their intimate experiences of life, from their deep convictions, and from the particular way that every human being, considered individually, has of observing the world in their own way.

Based on the lectures and the reaction of the public during the Seminar, it is possible to conclude that in this exercise,
apparently simple, of ‘observing the world in their own way’, human beings often respond in fashions divergent from the conventional models which are imposed in their native society or from the models of foreign societies which have been available for assimilation by people in different situations.

In general perceptions, therefore, the unique personalities of human beings play as much a part as the conditions of the society in which they live in giving character to their expressions, and they are different if those human beings have gone outside their native social environment. Distinct expressions of human beings, which share similar cultural bases, are due in great measure to the environment in which they are developed. It can also be observed that in human beings who have stayed within their vernacular societies, the weight of innovation within individuals can create the ‘different’ in their cultural and artistic expressions. Tradition, on many occasions overcome, weighs heavily on the form of expression of people who have had to leave their own societies, those human beings of the ‘diasporas’ maintain their nostalgic characters from the environment from which they were torn, they seek to go forward with their lost past. Those who have remained stable, on the other hand, seek to break free from national frameworks imposed by their vernacular societies, because it seems they wish to revolutionise their expressions, to depart from a past that, often, they do not desire.

A passionate point has to do with the vehicles which can be used by human beings to express themselves. It has to do with the instruments on which men and women rely to communicate, in one way or another, and, for that reason, tremendous value must be placed on the openness of native and adopted societies, as in the genuine concession of these instruments reside the real values of those who govern, not because they have declared themselves progressives or conservatives, traditional or revolutionary. The tints and shades of the expressions of human beings are tightly connected with the instruments on which they have relied to communicate. The characteristic marks of conforming or protests, of satisfaction or frustration, are revealed and projected, to make another difference easily appreciable, that which is related to expressions that come from native members and members by adoption of open societies, contrasted with those expressions which come from native members or members by adoption of oppressive societies, whether these oppressions arise from political reasons, or from the scarcity of economic resources, religious pressures, from situations of ethnic minorities etc. etc.

Apart from these considerations, which may be uncontrollable at some moments by those human beings who wish to express themselves, there are limitations which have to do with the studies by men and women to use instruments to which they are not otherwise accustomed. A fundamental limitation lies in the language which, when not maternal, imposes a shade of concentration and a necessity for synthesis, which can affect human expressions, thus limiting them.

In the analyses which were made during the Seminar these fundamental delineations were touched upon, not only to best explain it, with the aim that it be adequately captured, but to defend the value and essence of that ‘different expression’, by conditionings relative to traditions, remote pasts, situations not
overcome, reservations and parochialisms.

In that same line, in defending the value of a human expression in its essential character of being ‘different’, one could note that comparisons between different environments or different national situations, although at times conditioning agents, do not necessarily completely prevent the expression of human beings, just as national situations seen as optimum do not allow a guarantee of excellence in the expressions of men and women in those societies. This reality is most applicable in artistic fields, given that ‘geniuses’ do not necessarily live in rich and progressive societies, and because in many individual cases the limitations were themselves the incentive to achieve a splendour in artistic expression. It is also possible to think of a special excellence, in whatever manifestation, which arises from the confrontation between the artist with those limits, and their triumph over adversity; perhaps without having to confront and win, the expressions of a person may be routine, comfortable, nothing exceptional.

It is true that there are universal patterns of conduct, and that the expressions of human beings are concatenated and tightly connected. It is also true that common fashions and tendencies exist, and on many occasions, the coincidences in expressions may be due to the following of these moulds, these fashions and/or these tendencies. Further, it is true that all human expression is respectable and must merit all possible protection by the political leaders of the society in which the human being who is manifesting such expression lives.

As it is not possible to conceive that it would be possible to provide different guarantees to human expression within one society every time that different grades of these guarantees for individual expression are accepted, according to the distinct type of society (closed or oppressive), the fundamental issue in turn for expressions, especially but not exclusively, artistic expression, lies in its universal value, in the degree of acceptance or approbation, that such expressions receive from other human beings of different cultures and many societies.

To the element of ‘difference’, which must be protected, must be added universal acceptability, which does not depend necessarily on the type of society, but on the intrinsic value of the expression. Expressions which are believed to be powerful may be imposed so that they are heard and observed, but it is not possible for the weight of the power that they represent to enforce their acceptance and appreciation.

But just as it is not possible, in the bosom of national societies, to discriminate between the protections for the different expressions, in the world of human rights, which has ceased to be national, the validity of human expression is protected, when supporting the diffusion of distinct expressions, as the real possibility is given that they are duly appreciated by the community of societies, that is, by human beings in other latitudes.

The Seminar that we conducted last year, without pretensions of having been universal, was indeed open to expressions of many countries, and the facilities provided to diffuse the expressions must have contributed to the fact that the best were most widely accepted and appreciated.

If those who wished to limit the breadth of this Seminar lost the
opportunity to express themselves, it is because they did not choose to take up the opportunity to make their expressions worth as much as they themselves believe they are worth.

In this possibility and opportunity to express oneself lies another undeniable value of human rights, which puts in practice a theoretical principle of the international community, which proclaims that all states are legally equal, but which in practice suffers the hegemones and the exercise of the faculties of the most powerful. It could be said that, like states, all humans are legally equal, because they have, or should have, all the rights and all the national and universal guarantees in this plane of equality, and that the appreciation of the most appreciated expressions can only arise from the healthy comparison of different expressions, by finding them to be the best articulated, the best executed, that did not follow moulds nor limiting preconceptions.

The publication that the Humanities Research Centre and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research of the Australian National University now offers, is a collection of excellence, because it is a practical application of human rights, whose manifestations should not be feared, but rather, always promoted.

ENDNOTE

1 (Editors’ note) Part of the conference, ‘The Diaspora of the Latin American Imagination’. 
E n el año 2002, cuando preparábamos con el Centro de Humanidades de la Universidad Nacional de Australia, el Seminario sobre Derechos Humanos y las Expresiones Culturales, pude comprobar, una vez más, la reticencia que existe en muchos funcionarios de gobiernos para tratar de limitar las consideraciones relativas a los derechos humanos a un estudio simplista de convenios, protocolos y pactos internacionales, pero de no tocar temas que podrían implicar un juicio de valor acerca de los cumplimientos nacionales de esos compromisos, contraídos voluntariamente por los estados al suscribir esos convenios, protocolos y pactos, que se pretenden examinar aislados de las realidades.

Durante muchas décadas, desde la Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos y la concertación de los llamados Pactos, aquellos que se dieron, antes, en llamar sobre las ‘generaciones’ de derechos humanos — concepto éste por fortuna superado — muchas autoridades nacionales se han venido resistiendo a abrir sus conductas al examen internacional y en esa línea, el temor por la crítica estuvo siempre presente; y para obviarla se pensó que no había nada mejor que ocultar las realidades nacionales y de tratar de justificar pequeñas y grandes violaciones, desconocer que existieron atropellos y negar que se produjeron abusos.

A este temor por ser criticados, generalmente se puede asociar un profundo desconocimiento de las autoridades de gobiernos y de sus representantes acerca de los alcances y proyecciones de los derechos humanos; la burocracia suele ignorar la existencia de una identidad independiente, de los estados y de los gobiernos, de los derechos humanos, porque su promoción y respeto se deben a una corriente mundial, la misma que crece y que se fortalece en los hombres y mujeres individuales, no necesariamente en los gobiernos. Por supuesto que no puede desconocerse que en los casos en que los individuos de una sociedad cuentan con el respaldo de sus gobiernos, la aplicación y protección de los derechos humanos es mayor, pero no puede olvidarse que en presencia de dictaduras y de otros regímenes antidemocráticos y autoritarios, los abusos contra los derechos humanos logran de inmediato una solidaridad espontánea de los seres humanos de todo el mundo, que reclaman por sus congéneres atropellados por los dictadores y los autócratas.

Las estrategias de los gobiernos temerosos de la crítica internacional, aquellos que tratan de ocultar las violaciones o justificarlas, resultan...
usualmente imprácticas y tienen, por el contrario, efectos contraproducentes a los propósitos de los gobernantes abusivos y de sus representantes, puesto que las censuras y críticas que temen, no sólo que se hacen realidad, sino que se magnifican, al haberse comprobado las maniobras para negar la ocurrencia de violaciones y atropellos en un determinado estado.

En muchas ocasiones se ha podido comprobar que cuando un gobierno sucesor, más sensible y respetuoso que el que solía ocultar, informa acerca de la ocurrencia de violaciones y atropellos, da por entendido a la comunidad internacional que su deseo es rectificar los errores; no cabría pensarse en un cinismo oficial llevado al extremo de publicitar atropellos para seguirlos cometiendo.

En la enorme gama de aplicación de los derechos humanos, que está en permanente crecimiento, los afanes de los temerosos se pierden en el vacío, puesto que los progresos logrados por los seres humanos individuales, con o sin el apoyo de gobiernos, han alcanzado proporciones que sobrepasan los encasillamientos nacionales.

Es posible que frente a la comprobación de esta realidad, como último refugio, es que los gobernantes temerosos y sus representantes quieren imponer criterios limitativos, para que se analicen únicamente cuestiones teóricas sobre los instrumentos universales de los derechos humanos, que se ufanan en haberlos hechos suyos, sólo formalmente, no en la realidad. Los análisis que esos gobernantes quieren que se promueva, bajo sus estrictas condiciones, deberían ceñirse a los progresos instrumentales y a las proyecciones académicas de los ‘nuevos acuerdos y pactos sobre derechos humanos’.

En el Seminario del año pasado sobre derechos humanos,1 la Universidad Nacional de Australia y algunas de las personas que colaboramos, quisimos ir más allá de los encasillamientos y logramos ofrecer un panorama para que sean superados los temores de los representantes de gobiernos y entidades oficiales y nos propusimos considerar, con la mayor amplitud posible, a los derechos humanos como el primer marco conceptual de amparo para las ‘expresiones humanas’ y dentro de ellas, por ser las más sublimes, las expresiones que tienen que ver con la cultura, con las artes y con la música.

Hubo una afortunada coincidencia, que se podrá comprobar al leer las ponencias presentadas por los participantes en el Seminario, de creer que el ser humano ejerce un primordial derecho suyo, propio, cuando se expresa, cuando se manifiesta, y que no puede encontrarse un mejor ejemplo, un campo más fértil, que el que tiene que ver con la necesidad de proteger y salvaguardar la ‘conciencia humana’, entendida ésta no como un elemento místico o religioso, sino como el derecho natural para expresarse y la obligación correlativa, en gobernantes y dirigentes, de respetar esas manifestaciones y expresiones, todas ellas, incluidas las culturales y artísticas, por que son propias de los derechos fundamentales que tienen los seres humanos y porque las expresiones de ellos responden a sus vivencias íntimas, a sus convicciones profundas y a la manera particular que cada ser humano, individualmente considerado, tiene para ‘observar’ el mundo a su manera.

Con base a las conferencias y por las reacciones del público durante el Seminario, se puede concluir en que en ese ejercicio, aparentemente simple, de ‘observar el mundo a su manera’, los seres humanos en muchas ocasiones responden de diversa manera a los modelos
convencionales impuestos en su sociedad nativa o a los modelos de las sociedades ajenas que voluntariamente trataron de ser asimilados por las personas en distintas situaciones coyunturales.

En las apreciaciones generales, entonces, entran en juego tanto la personalidad propia de los seres humanos como las condiciones de la sociedad en la que viven, para caracterizar sus expresiones y ésta son distintas si los seres humanos han salido fuera de un medio social nativo, de las de sus congéneres que se quedaron a vivir en sus sociedades de origen. Las expresiones distintas de seres humanos, que comparten transfondos culturales similares, se deben en gran medida al medio en el que se desarrollaron. Incluso puede notarse que en los seres humanos que han permanecido en sus sociedades vernáculas, el peso de la innovación interna, individual, puede configurar lo ‘distinto’ de sus expresiones culturales y/o artísticas, mientras que la tradición, en muchas ocasiones superada, pesa sobremanera en la forma de expresarse de las personas que tuvieron que salir de sus sociedades propias, aquellos seres humanos de las ‘diásporas’ guardan caracteres nostálgicos del medio del que fueron arrancados, quisieran volver para partir hacia adelante desde su pasado perdido; mientras que los que se quedaron estables, suelen tratar de romper los moldes nacionales, impuestos por las sociedades vernáculas, porque parece que quieren revolucionar sus expresiones, para partir desde un pasado que, en muchas ocasiones, no lo desean.

Un punto apasionante tiene que ver con los vehículos que se pueden utilizar para que los seres humanos se expresen; tiene que ver con los instrumentos con los que los hombres y mujeres cuentan para manifestarse, de una u otra forma, y en ello hay que dar tremendo valor a la apertura de las sociedades nativas y de las de adopción, puesto que en la concesión real de estos instrumentos radican los valores reales de los gobernantes, no de que se hayan declarado progresistas o conservadores; tradicionales o revolucionarios. Los tintes y los matices de las expresiones de los seres humanos están estrechamente conectados con los instrumentos con los que contaron para poder manifestarse. Los rasgos de conformismos o de protestas; de satisfacción o de frustración, salen a la luz y se proyectan, para hacer otra diferencia fácilmente apreciable, la que se relaciona con las expresiones que vienen de miembros nativos y de miembros por adopción de sociedades abiertas, frente a aquellas expresiones que vienen de miembros nativos o por adopción, de sociedades opresivas, sean éstas opresiones debidas a razones políticas, por escasez de medios económicos, por presiones religiosas, por situaciones étnicas de minorías etc. etc.

Aparte de estas consideraciones, que pueden ser en algún momento incontrolables por los seres humanos que quieren expresarse, hay limitaciones que tienen que ver incluso con la preparación de hombres y mujeres para utilizar instrumentos que no les son habituales. Una limitación fundamental está en el idioma, que cuando no el materno, impone un matiz de concentración y una necesidad de síntesis, que pueden afectar a las expresiones humanas, por limitarlas.

En los análisis que se hicieron durante el Seminario precisamente se tocaron estos lineamientos fundamentales de la expresión, no únicamente para explicarla de mejor manera, a fin de que sea adecuadamente captada, sino también para defender el valor de la esencia de esa ‘expresión diferente’, por las condi-
cionantes relativas a tradiciones, pasados remotos, situaciones no superadas, recelos y localismos.

En esa misma línea, para defender el valor de una expresión humana en su carácter esencial de ser ‘diferente’, se pudo notar que las comparaciones entre medios distintos o entre diferentes situaciones nacionales, si bien son condicionantes en algunas oportunidades, no necesariamente obstaculizan totalmente la expresión de los seres humanos, así como tampoco permiten, las situaciones nacionales proclamadas como óptimas, que pueda haber una garantía de excelencia en las expresiones de los hombre y mujeres de esas sociedades. Especialmente en los campos artísticos esta realidad encuentra la mayor aplicabilidad, puesto que los ‘genios’ no vienen necesariamente de sociedades ricas y progresistas y porque en muchos casos individuales las limitaciones fueron incentivos para conseguir un esplendor en las expresiones artísticas. Cabría incluso pensarse que una excelencia especial, en cualquier manifestación, pudo deberse al enfrentamiento del artista con las limitaciones y a su triunfo contra las adversidades; quizás, de no haber tenido que enfrentarse y ganar, las expresiones de esa persona pudieron ser rutinarias, cómodas, nada excepcionales.

Si es cierto que existen patrones de conducta universales y que las expresiones de los seres humanos están concatenadas y estrechamente vinculadas. Es cierto también que existen modos y tendencias comunes y que en muchas ocasiones las coincidencias en las expresiones pueden deberse a haber seguido esos moldes, esas modas y/o esas tendencias. Es cierto también que toda expresión humana es respetable y que debe merecer toda la protección posible de los líderes políticos de la sociedad en la que vive el ser humano que se manifiesta.

Como no cabe concebirse que sea dable conceder diferentes garantías a las expresiones humanas, dentro de una misma sociedad, toda vez que si se acepta que existen distintos grados de esas garantías para las expresiones individuales, de conformidad con el distinto tipo de sociedad (cerradas u opresivas), la cuestión fundamental en torno a las expresiones, particularmente — no exclusivamente — a las artísticas, está en su valor universal, en el grado de aceptación o de acogida que esas expresiones reciben de parte de otros seres humanos, de diferentes culturas y de muchas sociedades.

Al elemento de ‘diferencia’, que hay que proteger, debe sumarse el de aceptabilidad universal, la que no depende, necesariamente, del tipo de sociedad, sino del valor intrínseco de la expresión. Las expresiones de los que se creen poderosos, pueden imponerse para que sean escuchadas u observadas, pero no puede, el peso del poder que representan, obligar a que esas expresiones sean bien acogidas, es decir, a que sean apreciadas.

Pero así como en el seno de las sociedades nacionales no cabe discriminar las protecciones para las distintas expresiones, en el mundo de los derechos humanos, que dejó de ser nacional, la validez de las expresiones humanas sí se proteje, al ayudar a que se proyecten y difundan las distintas expresiones, con lo que se está dando la posibilidad real a todas para que sean debidamente apreciadas por la comunidad de sociedades, esto es, por los seres humanos de otras latitudes.

El Seminario que llevamos a cabo en el año 2002, sin la pretensión de haber sido universal, si fue abierto a expresiones
de muchos países y las facilidades dadas para difundir las expresiones tuvieron que haber contribuido a que las mejores hayan sido más ampliamente aceptadas, mejor acogidas.

Si quienes quisieron limitar los alcances del Seminario, perdieron la posibilidad de expresarse, es que dejaron de aprovechar la oportunidad de hacer valer sus expresiones, tanto como ellos creen que valen.

En estas posibilidad y oportunidad para expresarse radica otro valor innegable de los derechos humanos, que ponen en práctica un principio teórico de la comunidad internacional, que proclama que todos los Estados son legalmente iguales, pero que en la práctica se sufren las hegemonías y el ejercicio de las facultades de los más poderosos. Podría decirse que así como los Estados, todos los hombres son jurídicamente iguales, porque tienen, o deben tener, todos los derechos y todas las garantías nacionales y universales, en ese plano de igualdad, unicamente de la comparación sana de las expresiones diferentes deben resultar las expresiones más apreciadas, por ser las mejor articuladas, las mejor logradas, las que no siguieron moldes ni preconceptos limitantes.

La publicación que el Humanities Research Centre y The Centre for Cross-Cultural Research de la Australian National University ahora ofrecen, es una colección de excelencia, porque resulta ser una aplicación práctica de los derechos humanos, cuyas manifestaciones no se debe temer, sino, por el contrario, siempre promover.
THE VULNERABLE IMAGINATION

DIASPORA AND NATURAL DISASTERS IN SALVADOREAN CULTURE

MIGUEL HUEZO MIXCO

This paper was first presented by Miguel Huezó in Spanish and has been translated by Marivic Wyndham. Jorge Avalos also made valuable contributions to the English translation of this text.

For Catalina, who made me her guest.

Let me begin by telling you a story. Some one thousand seven hundred years ago, in a remote region of the world which we now know as Central America, a terrible catastrophe took place. The volcano Caldera, at the centre of what is now the territory of El Salvador, erupted, turning thousands of kilometres of land into an inferno. We can only imagine what happened. The little that we know, however, is enough for us to imagine that it changed the nature of life in that part of the world. The spectacular explosions and the aftershocks which were heard hundreds of kilometres away were accompanied by seismic movements that changed the course of rivers and levelled all that was standing. For the unfortunate inhabitants of the area it was like a rehearsal of the end of the world. The magma produced rivers that embraced everything they found on their path; from the crater of the volcano, as from the mouth of a crazed giant, leapt innumerable boulders of igneous stone. The fumes and the ash climbed to heights of many kilometres, changed the colour of the sky and eclipsed the light of the sun, enveloping everything in darkness. A thick mantle of ash a foot high covered the ground for many hundreds of kilometres and contaminated the rivers and the estuaries, killing animal and vegetable life. Nowadays, when excavating several metres below the earth in zones of central and eastern El Salvador, labourers of public works and archaeologists find a coating of white earth superimposed over ancient strata of earth sedimented over many centuries. In that layer not so deep is found inert, the memory of the horror.

Our imagination, heir to the horrors of the twentieth century, can only compare that catastrophe to a nuclear attack of great proportions. Thousands of people must have died and many other thousands would have been forced to flee, never to return. When the fires subsided, some
witness, if indeed there were one, would have been in the presence of a chilling panorama: ten thousand square kilometres, way beyond what the eye could see, had been left desolate, without trace of life. For a large country, such a surface, though not insignificant, represents only a small piece of its map; but I ask you to imagine, just for a moment, what this signifies in terms of space for an inhabitant of my country. Ten thousand square kilometres represents half of the surface of my country.

Despite its severity, the eruption was only one of the many frequent and devastating earthquakes that have taken place in that land bristling with volcanoes. Wherever one looks, a volcano dominates the horizon. For ten years those same volcanoes, surrounded by highways, were the sanctuaries of the guerrillas. The principal Spanish cities in the country, baptised with Christian names (San Salvador, Santa Ana, San Miguel, San Vicente), were always founded alongside a volcano. They are the representation of Vulcan, the terrible Roman blacksmith. And of Zipacana, the choleric engineer of the underworld of the maya-quiché. If we believe in mythology, sooner or later those volcanoes erupted due to the devastation of the woods, which will awaken once again and their fury will be like a revenge. They seem to be there to remind us of the histories of innumerable shocks that took place long before their torrid interior valleys were inhabited. But, in fact, such happenings, such as eruptions, earthquakes, floods, ‘sleep’ in a security zone of the hard disk of our memory. Even the most recent seem to have been forgotten all too soon. (In the last century, there have been at least five earthquakes.) When I speak of such things, I am reminded of a personal experience during the civil war. Though it may seem incredible, while the jet planes and the UH1H army helicopters shot their interminable rounds of ammunition, we would be momentarily asleep in the trenches. It has been proven that the body subjected to the stress of violence distils a certain substance which re-establishes some equilibrium without which one might become insane. As they say, pain brings its own anaesthesia. It is only in this way that I can explain in part the sleepiness of the Salvadoreans in the face of our history.

Let us return to our story. Several generations had to pass before the area of disaster could return to a place of habitation. It is difficult to imagine that the lead-blue sheet of water which is Lake Ilopango, its surface now disturbed by boat builders and motor boats, was once the mouth of that cataclysm. Surely for many years that territory was regarded as a cursed land. Little by little, new waves of migration by groups of Mayan Indians and Mexicans began arriving at ‘ground zero’. There is evidence that around the sixth century of the Christian era, migrants from the north and the south of the continent began to change that awful landscape. In a strict sense, the culture was born of the ashes. There were built then the clay huts for the masses and the monumental centres with their amazing pyramidal temples destined for the higher social hierarchy; weddings were celebrated, and business carried on, and there were also wars; there were built trastos (a piece of furniture or junk) for the kitchen and jewellery; basic grains were cultivated and paths created. That process took centuries. The last migratory waves came just within 300 years of the first Spanish expeditions of 1524 originating from Guatemala. The brutality
of that encounter finds a pale reflection in the stereotypical images of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, which is like the portfolios of an unimaginative artist. Contrary to the romantic legend, indigenous societies were not gardens of delight. The social contrasts must have been great. For example, in the place known today as San Andrés, some twenty minutes by car from the capital, which flowered between the years 600–900 of our era, of that splendour only the vestiges of the monumental conglomerate in which the powerful lived remain. The area that held the homes of the poor has not been sufficiently excavated, but archaeological researchers estimate that it was not very different to the area of bay huts and cane of Joya de Cerén (300–900 of our era) which the archaeologists, with a poor sense of scale, have named ‘the Pompeii of America’. In fact, that suburb of agriculturalists bears no resemblance at all to that opulent bathing place that is the Bay of Naples. Herein lies an unfortunate comparison.

The Spanish conquistadores therefore found themselves in a highly hierarchical society at whose peak was found a complex mix of wealthy families of noble titles, military chiefs and religious leaders; and in the middle and lower classes, soldiers, merchants, hunters, farmers, artisans and prostitutes. I will not enter into detail about the new disasters that accompanied the coming of the Europeans; suffice it for the moment to mention the butcheries of the wars of conquest, the deaths caused by forced labour and — worst of all — the plagues. The first century after the coming of the Spaniards brought about a major drop in the indigenous population.7 The country became a death camp. Malaria, yellow fever, measles, smallpox and tuberculosis spread with the speed of lightning and extinguished humans in large areas of the land. The tale of a cleric in 1636 is terrifying: ‘I have seen large indigenous populations almost destroyed after the indigo sawmills were installed near them … Several times I have witnessed a great number of Indians with fever and I have been there when they have been taken from the mills for burial.’8

The years have passed and in ‘ground zero’ there has developed a culture which, as if in a fatal cycle which defies the imagination, continues to live under the signs of the diaspora and the disasters. But it is the imagination itself which seems stubbornly to resist leaving a fresh memory of such misfortune.

We are aware that the fountains of knowledge symbolic of the past express themselves principally in literary and pictorial ways. My argument insists that certain origins of today’s Salvadoreans and their identity have been shaped, and are the way they are, partly due to the absence of elaborate forms of representation from the arts and literature, capable of spilling themselves over the social corpus and of creating images which would grant greater quality to that kind of traction which is the memory, and without which societies seem to lose their grip as they step on the ladder.

In El Salvador there exists a kind of lethargy of the arts and literature — and it is even worse in the field of scientific research — in relation to our history of natural calamities.

Shouldn’t we, the writers, the painters, the musicians, pause more often in those places of grief?

Perhaps it is not possible for us to offer a response to such a question with the tools of psychology or sociology, but rather, as a zahori (clairvoyant), through
the arts of questioning the subterranean currents of our culture.

George Steiner maintains that what governs us as the human race is not the past in a literal sense, but rather the images of the past; highly structured images which remain engraved on our sensibility, almost in the same way as genetic information. In the case of Salvadorean culture, the images and the symbolic constructions of our past, our knowledges, which in any event are engraved on our sensibility, are relegated to the most profound of our subconscious. We know that in the past there were earthquakes, and we know there will be more; we also know that these repeat themselves with demonic persistence; we know that every so many years Salvadorean society is confronted by the sudden interruption of its activities in order to excavate in a primitive way the hidden parts wherein lie buried our loved ones. Finally, we also know that the disasters, though some may be of natural causes, in many cases are the work of the human hand: through indolence, inability or irresponsibility. We know this.

Those knowledges, incapable of granting us an appropriate approach to confront materially and spiritually the catastrophes which are yet to come and which make us less capable of recovering from their effects, are a kind of non-knowledge.

Contemplating things from a practical angle, why do the tragedies continue to repeat themselves without there apparently being a will capable of creating a culture able to prevent such risks? In El Salvador in the last one hundred years there have been no less than five earthquakes of considerable magnitude, and yet neither the private corporations, nor the state nor the universities are involved in seismological research that might help design responses to events that with all certainty will happen again. Neither do there exist brigades well trained in the rescue of victims. What happened at noon on the thirteenth of January of 2001 is a parable of the country. In the hours immediately after the earthquake, hundreds of impotent arms were unable to undertake the rescue of the victims because they lacked the tools to do so.

Events such as this cannot be seen as anything but a cultural failure which compromises the whole of the society.

Let us return to the theme of the imagination. In the aftermath of the earthquakes of January and February 2001, the press engaged in efforts without precedent to document our past of natural calamities. When they tried to find its traces in the literature, these could hardly be found, like clouds set in a clear sky, a few allusions to the earthquakes and other disasters. This silence is disquieting when we take into account the fact that, on the other hand, the grief caused by social injustice has in the last century captured the attention of an important part of the work of our major writers. And yet, the repeated punishment from the elements is absent from our symbolic representation. As if the fatal repetition of the tragedy had through the centuries segregated in our blood an acid capable of rendering its memory into a lethargy. The ambitious human objective of transcending, of overcoming through the imagination, literary or artistic, the frontiers of death, has not been able to give us a handle so that our memory might comprehend catastrophe.

Each era is reflected in the frame of its own past. Each era confirms its sense of identity with that past as its background.
Earth itself has its own memory: those sediments of black, white and brown earth, of many textures and colourings, like the ‘matericas’ paintings, which can be seen in the layers of the hills traversed by the highways, are the cerebral circumvolutions of its memory. It has to do with an inert knowledge which requires long processes of excavation and interpretation. The centuries that we Salvadoreans hold within us could be represented as a blend of great white stripes, some grey and some dark, one next to the other, like a zebra’s skin, which speaks of our way of being to those with ears to listen. Continuing with the metaphor, we could say that in regard to the internalising of the catastrophe as part of the soul of our culture, the imaginative arts, literature, the visual arts, the theatre can be located in one of those dark stripes. Whoever bothers to find it will appreciate that in an important way we lack the elaborate ways of representation that might help us to awaken our past.

I might sound like a radical, but I would argue that we can not only speak of the vulnerability of our ways but also of the vulnerability of our imagination. And this should not be understood as a gratuitous reproach. Evasion is a means by which the imagination grips the complex reconstruction of emotional texture. The imagination does not usually admit criticisms, but I would like to conclude this part of my discussion by saying that the concentrated light which the arts and literature cast over the realities of life, and in this case, over tragedy, are the vital kinds of contestation which our citizens also need. I want to underscore that we Salvadoreans are still to discover many links with our past; one of them, as I have tried to say, is the relationship with the catastrophes, and the inconceivable impassive perspective and amnesia that we commonly assume towards them.

I want now to jump to a second element: if in the ‘skin of the zebra’ of our memory the catastrophes occupy a dark stripe, the diaspora is a grey stripe. And this is thanks to the existence of at least one great poem. It is not necessary that there be many novels, many poems or innumerable plays, or to have hundreds of paintings, or to erect statues in remembrance of individuals, cities, events and martyrs. There is no doubt of the need for such things, but one great poem where genius shines is capable of crystallising, as does a timely gesture, the complexity of life and feeling. Let me offer a small part of that poem. It says:

We were wrong
For years and years and years we were wrong
The blizzard the hail the violent windstorms
The great devouring beasts
Nothing could detain our steps
We crossed rivers
Mountains
Abysms of terror
Peaks which no one had attempted before
Mighty deserts
Nothing could detain our steps
On the earth and stone we left deep prints
By the sea we strode
Over the high hills
We walked by day
By night
Without pausing
Walking being born and walking
Dreaming and walking
Giving birth and walking
We walked singing and walking
Nothing could detain our steps
With our home on our backs
Burrying dates
Settling the dead
...
Walking
Directly to destiny
Walking
Growing in hope
Walking
For years and years and years walking
walking walking

In the course of the history of El Salvador the events of which the poet speaks here have taken place on innumerable occasions. This poem by Pedro Geoffroy Rivas, entitled 'Account of the peregrination', contains one of those nervous extremes critical in the social and intellectual life of El Salvador. The emotion, the passionate adventure, the monotonous sense of the walk through unknown geographies and the rhythm of the changing pulse of the experience are present in this beautiful litany.

Of what does he speak to us? Or, more to the point, of whom does he speak to us?

Let us speak even if briefly of its author. Pedro Geoffroy Rivas was born early in the last century in the womb of a well-to-do family. Troublemaking, irreverent and visionary, he was persecuted and exiled many times more for his academic prestige as a linguist and indigenous scholar than for his poetry and his vital attitude which made him into a kind of cultural hero for many writers of the generation that preceded me. The metamorphosis of Geoffroy Rivas represents a key 'mutation' in Salvadorean culture. Not only because notwithstanding his origins from a landed family he embraced radical social struggles against injustice, but also because he was amongst the first to focus his penetrating gaze at the culturally and socially invisible indigenous people.

On the surface his poem speaks to us of the ancient migratory waves of the Mexican Anahuac reaching to the valleys and hills of what is today Salvadorean territory, when 'ground zero' began once again to be populated. But it also speaks to us of things intensely current. In reading it, within a context such as the Central Americas — and surely it would have resonances in places such as Bosnia and Afghanistan — it is impossible not to think of the hundreds of Salvadoreans that at this moment are hollowing the deserts, crossing the frontiers of the 'free world' in the frontier of the United States.

The poem, in short, speaks of our diaspora. The diaspora has been a constant in Salvadorean history. Since antiquity Salvadorean land was a thoroughfare for indigenous groups from the north and south of the continent, it formed part of an intermediate space between the great pre-Columbian civilisations and was a place of intermingling of the vegetables and animals of the north and south of the continent. Its privileged position has also been the cause of some of its tragedies. It has been a space dominated by four successive empires: Aztec, Spanish, British and the United States. It is difficult to understand El Salvador and Central America without relating them to this geopolitical condition and with imperial logics which have ravaged its sovereignty and which have always shaped our identities.

From our relations with the United States stems, in fact, a cultural phenomenon which is regarded with apprehension, but which is of vital importance like almost no other in the last
century. Since the 1980s, the Salvadorean diaspora to the United States has become an altogether new and transcendental agent in the economy and culture of the people of El Salvador. The capital stemming from the United States, not in the form of government aid towards development but rather directly from the pockets of migrants for their families, is as important as the PIB (Producto Interno Bruto). Our cities, as a reflection, are a replica of ‘gringolandia’. North American pop music is played in bands at private and social occasions: in the courtship of couples, in the rites of passage (the celebration of the fifteenth birthdays for girls and graduations) and in mass celebrations (national holidays and political campaigns).

The construction of that we call the ‘cultural imaginary’, traditionally rooted in historical, religious, ethnic and territorial peculiarities and in a common tongue, have simply changed. El Salvador literally has its gaze on the North. Many of our symbolic representations stem from there. Curiously, with all the implications of this phenomenon for the present and future of our country, there still does not exist a centre for the study of migrations. Through the migrants established in Los Angeles and New York, in El Salvador there are emerging new identities which contradict the idea of an identity founded exclusively on ‘national’ values. Let me linger a moment longer on this point.

Once again, if we pause to examine the ‘images of the Salvadorean past’, that is, the foundations of knowledge of our being as a society, we would realise the course of our feelings speak always — and I am here going to use an expression of the geographer David Browning — of a ‘well cultivated garden’, whose splendour has been spoiled by successive invaders. That is the idealised and false ‘garden of the indigenous past’ which in popular narratives appears devastated by the Spanish military expeditions; it is also the ‘garden of progress’ of the producers and manufacturers of coffee, threatened by communist aggression. To cling with our nails and teeth to those ideas of the past and to the political actions that derive from it, is one of the sources of our present difficulties.

The modern migrants are turning that nostalgia into wet paper. That garden a long time ago proved incapable of feeding its mourners. In fact, the region around the capital receives annually an influx of some 20 000 migrants from the interior where opportunities for work or even for survival are significantly lower. That movement assumed dramatic numbers during the eleven years of the civil war. The migration away from the country, which some analysts graphically termed an ‘expulsion of manual labour’, has a long history. One of the most moving stories of our literature, written by Salarrue at the start of the last century, deals with the journey of an old man and a child through the mountains of Honduras’ Chamelecon, carrying with them a phonograph. And one of the most popular poems of Salvador’s revolutionary era, in the second half of the twentieth century, by Roque Dalton, celebrates the deeds of Salvadoreans in foreign lands. Salvadorean migrants penetrating the Honduran mountains or constructing magnificent works of engineering in Panama, or illegally crossing the frontier with the United States, is not much different to that of which Geoffroy Rivas’ poem speaks: ‘walking through the deserts … with the sun on our backs … with the sun on our eyes … ’ The diaspora has found its
imagination. Meanwhile, in the midst of so much coming and going, the imagination itself has undergone its own diaspora.

In the midst of the over 70,000 Salvadoreans who every year move—mostly illegally—to the United States (it is estimated that 20 per cent of El Salvador’s population live outside the country),¹⁴ can also be found, now, as in the past, numerous artists and writers. The reasons have been principally political exile and the search for employment. I will not talk to you here about the difficult conditions confronting, in a country like El Salvador, the artist, the writer of literature, the scientist, the chess player or the ballerina; even though we are dealing here with educated individuals, their destiny is not much different to that of the men and women of low education, brought up in squalor, devastated by catastrophes and also, and this despite the notable advances that followed the peace of 1992, by diverse levels of political intolerance, racism (principally towards the indigenous peoples), exclusion and social violence. Our history has witnessed time and again the mutual disgust and hatred between Salvadoreans born equally under the law, fed sometimes by substantial, sometimes by trivial, motives. Violence has turned into a snake that bites its own tail: it has been cause and effect of the despair and the need to leave.

We say among ourselves that we are people without roots, a people without identity. Some researchers even speak of the ‘indelible identity’. This is the kind of nonsense that even educated mouths repeat. It is impossible not to have an identity. In cultural terms, the real issue is not whether our identity is ‘strong’ or ‘weak’, but rather on what it is based. Our identity, or rather, our identities, will remain an enigma while we continue to look to the false ‘essences’ of that country left behind. Research into our past is important, but it is perhaps as—or even more—important to research our present. In that sense, whether we like it or not, Salvadorean identity forms part of a more complex canvas: that of dependent societies in a global world. Our dependence on the US political, cultural, linguistic and territorial space is, at first glance, one of the largest in the whole of America. Said with a tongue-twister that will hopefully not be unpronounceable, we might not be what we would like to be, but that does not mean that we are not. Ours are, like so many others, roots which walk, and with our legs, bags in hand, pulling our children, we have crossed, and have settled in many latitudes, among the rest of humanity, under diverse and sometimes infamous physiognomies: that of the exile, the refugee, the lawbreaker, the expatriate. And perhaps on this matter our arts are underscoring the route of our present and our future. The diaspora of the imagination has had as one of its consequences the incorporation into the Salvadorean ‘canon’ of landscapes, principally urban, languages and vivid tales by writers in their diasporas to Mexico, Havana, Managua, Washington DC and New York. I don’t think I’m exaggerating when I claim that in a verbal sense Salvadorean literature is global. It moves across tongues, ideologies, frontiers.

Dr Beatriz Cortez, a young academic of Salvadorean origin who teaches in a university in California, has suggested that in postwar literature it is possible to find a critical resistance to the idea of a rigid identity which in her way of thinking holds and ultimately derives from, forms of violence.¹⁵ If against such a panorama
we hold the butter-like sheet of paper of Salvadorean literature, the vision we behold will be inevitably diffuse, contradictory and in many ways rich. Based on some contemporary Salvadorean stories, Cortez suggests several metaphors with which to approach the dislocated cultural identities. I am naturally suspicious of theory in relation to literature and the arts, especially because I hold the view that in most cases those word games and artificial constructions of models tend to make sterile an approach that, above all, is profoundly emotional and intuitive. And yet I believe that in works such as this and others, like those of Rafael Lara Martinez and Silvia Lucinda Castellanos, academics of Salvadorean origin who hold chairs in North American universities, have begun a dialogue between artists and academics, which hopefully will serve to feed those two poles of knowledge through the language as a source of knowledge.

The challenges for the arts and literature are immense. Sometimes there emerge insufferable stereotypes, of the kind good versus bad, or migrants versus the police. It is always this way. In *The Diáspora*, a novel by Horacio Castellanos Moya, is launched more of an ironic gaze at the desolate world of the Salvadorean exiles in Mexico City in the years of the civil war, and here is exposed the scourge of opportunism which is cultivated in the name of humanist values. Naturally, not all literary expressions prompted by the world of migration contain ‘the genius’ of which I have just spoken. We cannot condescend to mediocrity. But even in that ‘literature without genius’, descriptive, with stylistic demands, without substantive characters, attached to the methodologies of testimony, there have begun to be produced some images of our present identity, the sediments of which the Salvadorean memory will turn to. The dramas of the migration of men and women farmers who abandoned their places before the hurricane of the war, as well as the vicissitudes of the migrants to North American cities, are already being drawn in some of these works.

Surely the period before us holds new challenges for us. Our insistence on knocking on doors that all too frequently are closed before us, but which also open, has perhaps come to characterise us as a people who, in whatever latitude, exercises its right to be, live and work. Hatred and fear are what defeat the migrant; we who travel the world as guests or fugitives with the blue Salvadorean passport, know this all too well. Because of its history, its culture, its identity, El Salvador should become a major force in the study of migrations and take part in international initiatives which bring protection to the nomads of the world. This is why, our children, like an endless current — and if things continue as they are, our children’s children — as much as our grandparents, one good day will close the door behind them and head for the paths of the diaspora. To the North or to the South, whatever. What is a fact is that the fatal cycle of our culture will have been completed. And when in twenty or one hundred years, a volcanc eruption or a new development of the tectonic plagues beneath our feet destroys the dreams of a whole society, we will hopefully be in a better position to respond to the question which lies at the base of this long disquisition of mine about the fugitive memory:

‘Why does the imagination follow impotently the frenetic rhythm of the lines in the seismographs of our tragedy?’
Incurable victims of forgetfulness, our present indifference before the tragedy, if it is not caught inside the net of rhetorical reproaches and lies with the odour of bad politics, should present us with not only political but also with aesthetic concerns. We tend to spout all manner of general and well-founded recriminations against the politicians, but perhaps we do not realise that the language, that curved arc able to bind personal and collective histories with the pulse of conscience and with the devastations of love and passion, able to sink itself in the most hidden substrata of the memory, with its sequel of endurance, does not come to the rescue of our solitude, of our dissatisfaction, to tell us that life makes sense in the midst of tragedy and human vileness. To sleep for a moment at the trenches is, like the evasion of pain, perfectly legitimate; but thankfully this is not the only road that the imagination takes.

Even if I am called a sceptic, I do not see the gates opening to an era of genuine confidence and hope; rather, the futures and inevitable setbacks that will come from social catastrophes and explosions whose regressive count has already begun, and which will be commensurate with the indexes of human development, earnings per capita and other terms of the gloomy economic sciences, today seem to condemn us to a path with only one exit: to flee, by foot, by train, swimming or on board an unexpected rocket of the imagination, just so long as it is far, very far from here.

La Antigua, Guatemala, agosto 2002

ENDNOTES


4 The Lienzo de Tlaxcala contains representations of battles between Spaniards and the indigenous peoples in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. A reproduction of these images corresponding to El Salvadorian territory can be seen in P. Escalante Arce, The Tlaxcaltecas in Central America, (San Salvador: CONCULTURA, 2001).

5 San Andrés had been a regional capital which came to dominate the fertile valley of Zapotitán. It was discovered in 1910.

6 The site of Joya de Cerén was discovered in 1976. The first excavations begun in 1978 brought to light a complex of humble communal dwellings extraordinarily preserved by the action of volcanic ash, which may have occurred 1400 years ago. It has been declared World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.


9 George Steiner, *En el Castillo de Barbara Azul*, (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1998), p. 17.


11 Browning, *El Salvador, la Tierra y el Hombre*.

12 The story is entitled ‘Semos Malos’ and formed part of the volume *Cuentos de Barro, Narrativa Completa I*, (San Salvador: CONCULTURA, 1994).

13 I refer to the ‘Poema de amor’ included in *Historias Prohibidas de Pulgarcito*, (México: Siglo XXI, 1974).


15 Original typescript, cited by permission of the author.

LA IMAGINACIÓN VULNERABLE:
Diaspora y desastres naturales en la cultura salvadoreña

MIGUEL HUEZO MIXCO

Para Catalina, que me hizo su huésped

Comenzaré contándoles una historia. Hace unos mil setecientos años, en una remota región del mundo que ahora conocemos como Centroamérica ocurrió una terrible catástrofe. El volcán Caldera, en el centro del actual territorio de El Salvador, erupcionó convirtiendo miles de kilómetros de tierra en un infierno. Como no hay testigos, lo que ocurrió es difícil de describir. Lo poco que sabemos, sin embargo, es suficiente para imaginarnos que cambió la vida en esa parte del mundo. Las espectaculares explosiones y los retumbos que se escucharon a centenares de kilómetros de distancia estuvieron acompañados de enjambres de sismos que cambiaron el cauce de los ríos y derribaron todo lo que se encontraba de pie. Para los desafortunados habitantes de la zona aquello fue como un ensayo del fin del mundo. El magma produjo ríos que abrasaron todo lo que encontraron a su paso; del cráter del volcán, como de la boca de un gigante enloquecido, saltaron innumerables bombas de piedra ígnea. Los vapores y la ceniza se elevaron a kilómetros de altura, cambiaron la coloración del cielo y eclipsaron la luz del sol hasta sumergirlo todo en las tinieblas. Un espeso manto de ceniza del alto de una pierna cubrió los suelos en centenares de kilómetros a la redonda y contaminó los ríos y los estuarios aniquilando animales y vegetales. En la actualidad, cuando se excava varios metros bajo la tierra en las zonas central y occidental de El Salvador, los trabajadores de obras públicas y los arqueólogos se encuentran con un manto de tierra blanca superpuesto a otros antiguos estratos de tierra sedimentada a lo largo de los siglos. En esa capa no tan profunda se encuentra, inerme, la memoria del pavor.

Nuestra imaginación, hija de los horrores del siglo veinte, sólo puede comparar aquella catástrofe con un ataque nuclear de grandes dimensiones. Millares de personas debieron perecer y otros miles fueron forzados a huir para jamás volver. Cuando se aplacaron los fuegos, algún testigo, si acaso lo hubo, pudo presenciar un panorama escalofriante: diez mil kilómetros cuadrados, mucho más allá de lo que la vista alcanza, quedaron desolados, sin rastro de vida. Para un país de gran tamaño, esa superficie, aunque nada despreciable, es sólo una pequeña pieza de su mapa; pero les pido que por
un momento traten de imaginarse lo que eso significa en la noción de espacio para un habitante del país de donde vengo. Diez mil kilómetros cuadrados son la mitad de la superficie de mi país.

Pese a su gravedad la erupción fue solamente uno de los tan frecuentes como devastadores sacudimientos que han tenido lugar en esa tierra erizada de volcanes. Donde quiera que uno mire, el horizonte aparece dominado por uno de esos colosos. Por diez años esos mismos volcanes rodeados de carreteras fueron santuarios de las guerrillas. Las principales ciudades españolas del país, bautizadas con nombres cristianos (San Salvador, Santa Ana, San Miguel, San Vicente), se fundaron siempre al lado de un volcán. Son la representación de Vulcano, el terrible herrero romano. Y de Zipacná, el colérico ingeniero del mundo subterráneo de los maya-quiché. Si hemos de creer en la mitología, tarde o temprano esos volcanes erosionados por la tala de los bosques despertarán de nuevo y su furia será como una venganza. Parecieran estar allí para recordarnos las historias de los incontables sobresaltos sufridos desde mucho antes de que fueran habitados sus tórridos valles interiores. Pero en realidad esos acontecimientos, tales como erupciones, terremotos, inundaciones, ‘duermen’ en una zona de seguridad del disco duro de nuestra memoria. Hasta los más recientes parecen haberse olvidado demasiado pronto. (En el último siglo han ocurrido al menos cinco terremotos.) Cuando hablo de estas cosas me viene a la memoria una experiencia personal de la guerra civil. Aunque parece increíble, mientras los aviones a reacción y los helicópteros UH1H del ejército disparaban sus interminables rondas de metralla, nosotros solíamos dormirnos por instantes en las trincheras. Está probado que el cuerpo sometido al estrés de la violencia destila una sustancia que restablece cierto equilibrio sin el cual uno podría volverse loco. Como se dice, el golpe trae su anestesia. Sólo así puedo explicarme en parte el adormecimiento de los salvadoreños ante nuestra historia.

Volvamos a nuestro relato. Tuvieron que pasar varias generaciones para que el área del desastre volviera a ser un lugar habitable. Es difícil imaginarse que esa lámina azul plomizo del lago de Ilopango, surcada de embarcaciones artesanales y motos acuáticas, fuera alguna vez la boca de aquel cataclismo. Seguramente por muchos años aquel territorio fue visto como una tierra maldita. Poco a poco, nuevas oleadas migratorias de grupos mayas y mexicanos comenzaron a llegar a la ‘zona cero’. Existen evidencias de que alrededor del siglo VI de la era cristiana, emigrantes provenientes del norte y del sur del continente comenzaron a modificar aquel paisaje funesto. En sentido estricto, la cultura renació entre las cenizas. Se construyeron entonces las chozas de barro para la plebe, y los centros monumentales con sus asombrosos templos piramidales destinados para la jerarquía social más alta; se celebraron matrimonios, negocios y también se emprendieron guerras; se fabricaron trastos de cocina y joyería; se cultivaron granos básicos y se abrieron caminos. Aquel proceso tomó siglos. Las últimas oleadas migratorias llegaron apenas con una diferencia de trescientos años de las primeras expediciones españolas que incursionaron en 1524 provenientes de Guatemala. La brutalidad de aquel encuentro tiene un pálido reflejo en las estereotipadas imágenes del Lienzo de Tlaxcala, que es así como el portafolios de un artista poco imaginativo.

Contrariamente a lo que proclama la leyenda romántica, las sociedades indígenas tampoco eran un jardín de las
delicias. Los contrastes sociales debieron ser tremendos. Por ejemplo, en el sitio conocido ahora como San Andrés, a unos veinte minutos en automóvil desde la capital, que floreció entre los años 600 a 900 de nuestra era, de aquel esplendor nos quedan únicamente los vestigios del conjunto monumental en el que vivieron los poderosos. La zona de viviendas populares no ha sido suficientemente excavada, pero las investigaciones arqueológicas estiman que no fue muy distinta del conjunto de chozas de barro y caña de Joya de Cerén (300 a 900 de nuestra era) que los arqueólogos, con un pobre sentido de la medida, han llamado ‘la Pompeya de América’. En realidad, ese caserío de agricultores no tienen semejanza alguna con aquel opulento balneario de la bahía de Nápoles. He allí una comparación infeliz.

Los conquistadores europeos se encontraron, pues, con una sociedad sumamente jerarquizada en cuya cima estaba una abigarrada mezcla de familias adineradas con títulos de nobleza, jefes militares y jerarcas religiosos, y en las partes medias y bajas: soldados, comerciantes, cazadores, agricultores, artesanos y prostitutas. No entraré en detalles sobre los nuevos desastres que acompañaron la llegada de los europeos; bástenos por ahora mencionar las carnicerías de la guerra de conquista, las muertes a causa de los trabajos forzados y — lo peor de todo — las pestes. El primer siglo posterior a la llegada española produjo una caída exponencial de la población indígena. El país se convirtió en un campo de muerte. La malaria, la fiebre amarilla, la viruela, el sarampión y la tuberculosis, se propagaron a la velocidad del rayo y extinguieron la vida humana en grandes extensiones de territorio. El relato de un clérigo de 1636 es estremecedor: ‘He visto grandes poblaciones indígenas casi destruidas después de que instalaron cerca de ellas los obrajes de anil ... Varias veces he confesado a un gran número de indios con fiebre y he estado allí cuando los llevan de los molinos para enterrarlos’.

Han pasado los años y en la ‘zona cero’ ha tenido lugar el desarrollo de una cultura que, como en un ciclo fatal que desafía a la imaginación, continúa viviendo bajo los signos de la diálisis y los desastres. Pero es la imaginación misma la que parece resistirse tercamente a dejar una memoria fresca de la desgracia.

Sabemos que las fuentes del conocimiento simbólico del pasado se expresan, principalmente, de manera literaria y pictórica. Mi tesis sostiene que ciertos orígenes del ser salvadoreño actual y de su identidad, se han configurado, y son de la manera que son, en parte por la ausencia de formas de representación muy elaboradas, provenientes del arte y la literatura, capaces de derramarse sobre el cuerpo social y de crear imágenes que produzcan esa especie de herramienta prensil que es la memoria, sin la cual las sociedades parecen perder el pie en el peldaño de la escalera.

En El Salvador existe una especie de letargo en el arte y la literatura — y es peor en las investigaciones científicas — respecto de nuestra historia de calamidades naturales.

¿No debiéramos los escritores, los pintores, los músicos, detenernos más a menudo en esos parajes del dolor? Quizás no nos corresponda dar respuesta a esta interrogante con las herramientas de la sicología o la sociología, sino, como un zahorí, con las artes de la indagación en las corrientes subterráneas de nuestra cultura.

George Steiner dice que lo que nos rige como humanidad no es el pasado en su sentido literal, sino las imágenes del
pasado, imágenes altamente estructuradas que permanecen impresas en nuestra sensibilidad, casi de la misma forma que la información genética. En el caso de la cultura salvadoreña, las imágenes y las construcciones simbólicas de nuestro pasado, nuestros saberes, que de cualquier manera están impresos en nuestra sensibilidad, suelen estar relegados a lo más profundo de nuestra inconsciencia. Sabemos que en el pasado hubo terremotos, sabemos que habrá más; sabemos también que éstos se repiten con una diabólica persistencia; sabemos que cada tantos años la sociedad salvadoreña se ve enfrentada a la interrupción repentina de sus actividades para excavar de manera primitiva los escombros donde han quedado sepultados nuestros seres queridos. Finalmente, sabemos también que los desastres si bien son de origen natural, en muchos casos se producen por la mano humana: por indolencia, incapacidad o irresponsabilidad. Lo sabemos.

Esos saberes incapaces de otorgarnos una actitud apropiada para enfrentar material y espiritualmente las catástrofes que están por venir y que nos vuelven menos capaces de recuperarnos de sus efectos equivalen a un no-saber.

Viendo las cosas desde un ángulo práctico, ¿por qué siguen repitiéndose las tragedias sin que aparentemente exista una voluntad capaz de crear una cultura de prevenir los riesgos? En El Salvador en los últimos cien años se han sufrido no menos de cinco terremotos de considerable magnitud, sin embargo ni las corporaciones privadas, ni el Estado ni las universidades se encuentran desarrollando investigaciones sismológicas que ayuden a diseñar respuestas ante eventos que con toda seguridad van a producirse. Tampoco existen brigadas bien entrenadas para el rescate de víctimas. Lo que ocurrió el mediodía del trece de enero del año 2001 es una parábola del país. En las primeras horas después del terremoto, centenares de brazos impotentes no pudieron emprender el rescate de las víctimas porque no contaban con otras herramientas que sus manos.

Eventos como ése no pueden ser vistos de otra manera que como una derrota cultural que compromete al conjunto de la sociedad.

Volvamos al tema de la imaginación. A raíz de los terremotos de enero y febrero de 2001, la prensa realizó un esfuerzo sin precedentes para documentar nuestro pasado de calamidades naturales. Cuando se intentó encontrar su huella en la literatura, apenas pudieron localizarse, como nubarrones en medio de un cielo despejado, unas pocas alusiones a los terremotos y demás catástrofes. El dato resulta inquietante si tomamos en cuenta que, en cambio, el dolor a causa de la injusticia social ha captado en el último siglo la atención de una parte importante de la obra de nuestros mayores escritores y escritoras. Sin embargo, el repetido castigo de los elementos está ausente de nuestra representación simbólica. Como si la repetición fatal de la tragedia hubiese segregado en nuestra sangre, a través de los siglos, un ácido capaz de sumir su recuerdo en un letargo. El ambicioso objetivo humano de perdurar, de sobrepasar mediante la imaginación, literaria o artística, las fronteras de la muerte, no ha sido capaz de regalarnos una rienda para que nuestra memoria cabalgue a la catástrofe.

Cada época se refleja en el cuadro de su propio pasado. Cada época verifica su sentido de identidad teniendo ese pasado como telón de fondo. La Tierra misma tiene su propia memoria: esos sedimentos
de tierra negra, blanca, marrón, de texturas y coloraciones diversas, como las pinturas 'matéricas', que se aprecian en los tajos de los cerros atravesados por las autopistas, son las circunvoluciones cerebrales de su memoria. Se trata de una información inerte que requiere largos procesos de excavación y de interpretación. Los siglos que los salvadoreños tenemos dentro de nosotros podrían representarse como la mezcla de grandes franjas claras, otras grises y franjas de oscuridad, una al lado de la otra, como una piel de cebra, que habla de nuestra forma de ser al que sabe escuchar. Siguiendo con el símil, digamos que en lo relativo a la interiorización de la catástrofe como parte del alma de nuestra cultura, las artes de la imaginación, la literatura, la plástica, el teatro, se encuentran en una de esas franjas de oscuridad. Quien quiera que se tome el trabajo de establecerlo llegará a comprender que en una medida importante adolecemos de formas de representación altamente elaboradas que nos ayuden a despertar nuestro pasado.

Puede sonar un poco radical, pero yo diría que no sólo podemos hablar de la vulnerabilidad de nuestro entorno sino también de la vulnerabilidad de nuestra imaginación. Y esto no debiera entenderse como un reproche gratuito. De pronto la evasión es una de las maneras en que la imaginación emprende la complicada reconstrucción del tejido emocional. La imaginación no suele admitir críticas, pero quisiera concluir esta parte de mi exposición diciendo que la concentrada luz que el arte y la literatura arrojan sobre los hechos de la realidad, y en este caso sobre la tragedia, son el tipo de vitales contestaciones que también necesitan nuestros ciudadanos. Deseo subrayar que los salvadoreños todavía tenemos que descubrir muchas conexiones con nuestro pasado; una de ellas, como he tratado de decirlo, es la relación con las catástrofes y el incomprensible sentido de imposibilidad prospectiva y de amnesia que comúnmente asumimos frente a ellas.

Quiero saltar ahora a un segundo elemento: si en la ‘piel de cebra’ de nuestra memoria las catástrofes ocupan una franja oscura, la diáspora ocuparía una zona gris. Y esto es posible por la existencia de al menos un gran poema. No hace falta que se escriban muchas novelas, muchos poemas o innumerables obras de teatro, o que se pinten centenares de cuadros y se erijan estatuas en recordación de personas, ciudades, acontecimientos y mártires. Sin menoscabo de la necesidad de que las haya, un sólo gran poema donde brille el genio es capaz de cristalizar, como en un gesto oportuno, la complejidad de la vida y de los sentimientos. Voy a leer una pequeña parte de ese poema. Dice:

*Anduvimos errantes*

Años años años anduvimos errantes
La ventisca el granizo los violentos vendavales
Las grandes bestias devoradoras
Nada pudo detener nuestros pasos
Cruzamos ríos
Montes
Abismos de terror
Cumbres a las que nadie se atreviera antes
Pavorosos desertos
Nada pudo detener nuestros pasos
En tierra arena roca dejamos hondas huellas
Junto al mar caminamos
Sobre las altas sierras
De día caminamos
De noche
Sin detenernos
Caminando naciendo y caminando
Soñando y caminando
Pariendo y caminando

Prometo que no volveré más a esa extensión de la imaginación. Pero si aún hay quien quiera que se tome el trabajo de establecerlo, dejaré que diga lo que considera que es la forma que los salvadoreños han de dar a la catástrofe como parte del alma de nuestra cultura.
Caminamos cantando y caminando
Nada pudo detener nuestros pasos
Con nuestra casa a cuestas
Enterrando fechas
Estableciendo muertos...
Caminando
Directos al destino
Caminando
Creciendo en esperanza
Caminando
Años años años caminando caminando caminando...10

Durante el curso de la historia salvadoreña los sucesos de los que aquí habla el poeta han tenido lugar en innumerables ocasiones. Este poema de Pedro Geoffroy Rivas titulado ‘Cuenta de la peregrinación’ contiene uno de esos extremos nerviosos cruciales en la vida social e intelectual de El Salvador. La emoción, la apasionada aventura, el sentido monótono de la caminata a través de geografías desconocidas y el ritmo del cambiante pulso de la experiencia están presentes en esta hermosa letanía.

¿De qué nos habla? O, mejor dicho, ¿de quiénes nos habla?

Hablemos aunque sea brevemente de su autor. Pedro Geoffroy Rivas nació a principios del siglo pasado en el seno de una familia pudiente. Revoltoso, desacralizador y vanguardista, perseguido y exiliado numerosas veces, más que por su prestigio académico como lingüista e indigenista fue por su poesía y su actitud vital que llegó a convertirse en una especie de héroes cultural para muchos escritores anteriores a mi generación. La metamorfosis de Geoffroy Rivas representa una importante ‘mutación’ en la cultura salvadoreña. No sólo porque viniendo de una familia de terratenientes abrazó las luchas sociales radicales en contra de la injusticia, sino también porque fue uno de los primeros en poner su mirada penetrante sobre los indígenas cultural y socialmente invisibilizados.

Su poema a simple vista nos habla de las antiquísmas oleadas migratorias provenientes del Anáhuac mexicano hasta los valles y montes del actual territorio salvadoreño, cuando la ‘zona cero’ comenzó nuevamente a poblarse. Pero también nos habla de cosas intensamente actuales. Al leerlo, en un contexto como el centroamericano —y seguramente tendría resonancias en lugares como Bosnia y Afganistán— es inevitable pensar en los centenares de salvadoreños que en este instante están hollando los desiertos, cruzando las fronteras del ‘mundo libre’ en la frontera de Estados Unidos.

El poema, pues, habla de nuestra diáspora. La diáspora ha sido una constante de la historia salvadoreña. Desde la antigüedad el territorio salvadoreño fue un lugar de paso para grupos indígenas provenientes del norte y el sur del continente, formó parte de un espacio intermedio entre las grandes civilizaciones precolombinas y fue un lugar de mezcla de las especies vegetales y animales del norte y el sur del continente. Su posición privilegiada ha sido también causa de algunas de sus tragedias. Ha sido un espacio dominado sucesivamente por cuatro imperios: azteca, español, inglés y estadounidense. Es difícil entender a El Salvador y a Centroamérica sin relacionarlos con esa condición geopolítica y con las lógicas imperiales que han socavado su soberanía y que también han moldeado nuestras identidades.
De nuestra relación con los Estados Unidos proviene, precisamente, un fenómeno cultural que suele ser observado con aprensión, pero que es de una importancia capital como casi ninguno otro en el último siglo. Desde los años 80 del siglo pasado la diáspora salvadoreña hacia los Estados Unidos llegó a convertirse en un agente completamente nuevo y trascendental en la economía y en la cultura salvadoreñas. El dinero que viene desde Estados Unidos, no en forma de ayuda gubernamental para el desarrollo sino directamente de los bolsillos de los emigrantes para sus familias, es tan importante como el producto interno bruto (PIB). Nuestras ciudades, como reflejo, son una réplica de ‘gringolandia’. La pop music norteamericana las hace de banda sonora en los eventos sociales elementales y en los multitudinarios: en el cortejo de las parejas, en los ritos de paso (fiestas de quince años y graduaciones) y en las celebraciones de masas (fiestas patronales y campañas políticas).

La construcción de eso que da en llamarse el ‘imaginario cultural’, tradicionalmente enraizado en peculiaridades históricas, religiosas, étnicas, territoriales y de una lengua común, simplemente ha cambiado. El Salvador, literalmente, tiene sus ojos puestos en el Norte. Muchas de nuestras representaciones simbólicas provienen de allá. Curiosamente, con toda la trascendencia de este fenómeno para el presente y el futuro del país, todavía no existe un centro de estudios para las migraciones.

Por la vía de los emigrantes establecidos en Los Ángeles y Nueva York, en El Salvador están emergiendo nuevas identidades que contradicen la idea de una identidad fundada exclusivamente en valores ‘nacionales’. Voy a demorarme un minuto más en este punto.

De nuevo, si nos detenemos a examinar las ‘imágenes del pasado salvadoreño’, es decir, las fuentes del conocimiento de nuestro ser como sociedad, comprobaremos que nuestro curso de sentimientos habla siempre — y voy a usar una expresión del geógrafo inglés David Browning11 — de un ‘jardín bien cultivado’, cuyo esplendor ha sido depredado por sucesivos invasores. Ese es el idealizado y falso ‘jardín del pasado indígena’ que en las narraciones vulgares aparece arrasado por las expediciones militares españolas; es también el ‘jardín del progreso’ de los productores y comercializadores del café, amenazado por la agresión del comunismo. Aferrarnos con uñas y dientes a esas ideas del pasado y a las acciones políticas que de ellas se derivan, es una de las fuentes de nuestras dificultades presentes.

Los emigrantes modernos están convirtiendo esa nostalgia en papel mojado. Aquel jardín, desde hace muchos años probó ser incapaz de alimentar a sus moradores. En la actualidad, la zona de la capital recibe al año un flujo de unos veinte mil emigrantes del interior donde las oportunidades de empleo o de subsistencia son significativamente inferiores. Este movimiento alcanzó números dramáticos durante los once años de guerra civil. La emigración fuera del país, que algunos analistas denominan gráficamente como una ‘expulsión de mano de obra’, viene de larga data. Uno de los cuentos más estremecedores de nuestra literatura, escrito por Salarrué a principios del siglo pasado, es el viaje de un viejo y un niño por las montañas del Chamelecón hondureño llevando un fonógrafo.12 Y uno de los poemas más populares de la época revolucionaria
salvadoreña, en la segunda mitad del siglo veinte, de Roque Dalton, canta las hazañas de los salvadoreños en tierras extrañas. La epopeya de los emigrantes salvadoreños penetrando la montaña hondureña o construyendo fantásticas obras de ingeniería en Panamá, o cruzando a hurtadillas la frontera de Estados Unidos, no es muy distinta de la que nos habla el poema de Geoffroy Rivas: ‘caminando por los desiertos … con el sol a la espalda … con el sol en los ojos … ’. La diáspora ha conseguido encontrar su imaginación. Entre tanto, en medio de tanto ir y venir, la imaginación misma ha tenido su propia diáspora.

En medio de los más de setenta mil salvadoreños que anualmente ingresan, la mayoría ilegalmente, a Estados Unidos (se estima que el 20 por ciento de la población salvadoreña vive en el exterior), también se encuentran, ahora como en el pasado, numerosos artistas y escritores. Las razones han sido principalmente el exilio político y la búsqueda de oportunidades laborales. No voy a hablarles de las difíciles condiciones que enfrentan en un país como El Salvador una artista, un autor de obras literarias, un científico, un ajedrecista o una bailarina; aunque se trata de personas cultivadas, su destino no es muy diferente del de los hombres y mujeres con escolaridad insuficiente, criados en entornos insalubres, acechados por catástrofes y también, pese a los notables avances posteriores a la firma de la paz en 1992, por diversos grados de intolerancia política, racismo (principalmente hacia los indígenas), exclusión y violencia social. Nuestra historia ha presenciado la aplicación repetida del desprecio y el odio recíprocos entre salvadoreños nacidos iguales ante la ley, alentados por motivos a veces sustantivos y a veces triviales. La violencia ha llegado a ser una serpiente mordiendo su propio cola: ha sido causa y efecto de la desesperanza y de la necesidad de partir.

Se dice entre nosotros mismos que somos un pueblo sin raíces, un pueblo sin identidad. Algunos investigadores hablan incluso de una ‘identidad endeble’. Este es el tipo de tonterías que se repiten aun en boca de personas educadas. Es imposible no tener una identidad. En términos culturales el problema de fondo no es si nuestra identidad es ‘fuerte’ o ‘débil’, sino en torno a qué está construida. Nuestra identidad, o mejor dicho, nuestras identidades, seguirán siendo un enigma mientras sigamos volviendo la vista hacia las falsas ‘esencias’ de ese país que quedó atrás. La indagación histórica es importante, pero quizás sea de igual o mayor importancia la indagación en nuestro presente. En este sentido, nos guste o nos disguste, la salvadoreñidad forma parte de una trama más compleja: la de las sociedades dependientes en el mundo global.

Nuestra dependencia respecto del espacio político, cultural, lingüístico y territorial estadounidense es, a simple vista, una de las mayores de toda América. Dicho con un trabalenguas que ojalá no resulte irrepetible, probablemente no seamos los que quisiéramos, pero ello no significa que no seamos. Las nuestras son, como todas, raíces que caminan, y con nuestras piernas, maleta en mano, halando a nuestros hijos, hemos cruzado, desde hace siglos, las barreras de la estupidez, que eso son las fronteras, y hemos habitado en diversas latitudes, entre el resto de la humanidad, bajo diversas y a veces infames fisionomías: la del exiliado, la del refugiado, la del errante, la del sin patria. Y quizás en este punto nuestras letras estén subrayando el rumbo de nuestro presente y el de
nuestro porvenir. La diáspora de la imaginación ha tenido como uno de sus efectos la incorporación al ‘canon’ salvadoreño de paisajes, principalmente urbanos, lenguajes y episodios vividos por los escritores en su diáspora por México, La Habana, Managua, Washington D.C. y Nueva York. No creo exagerar cuando digo que el orden verbal de la literatura salvadoreña es global. Se mueve a través de lenguas, ideologías, fronteras.

La doctora Beatriz Cortez, una joven académica de origen salvadoreño que imparte clases en una universidad de California, ha sugerido que en la literatura de posguerra es posible detectar una resistencia crítica a la idea de una identidad rígida que a su modo de ver contiene y deriva, eventualmente, en formas de violencia. Si sobre ese panorama ponemos la hoja de papel mantequilla de la literatura salvadoreña, la visión que tenemos será irremediablemente difusa, contradictoria y, en muchos sentidos, rica. A partir de algunas narraciones contemporáneas salvadoreñas, Cortez sugiere diversas metáforas para aproximarnos a las dislocadas identidades culturales. Suelo ser desconfiado de la teoría en relación con la literatura y las artes, sobre todo porque tengo la impresión de que la mayoría de las veces esos juegos de palabras y artificiosas construcciones de modelos suelen volver estéril un acercamiento que es, por sobre todo, profundamente emocional e intuitivo. Sin embargo creo que trabajos como éste y otros, como los de Rafael Lara Martínez y Silvia Lucinda Castellanos, académicos de origen salvadoreño que imparten cátedras en universidades norteamericanas, se ha emprendido un diálogo entre artistas y académicos, que ojalá sirva para alimentar a esos dos polos del conocimiento a través del lenguaje como una fuente de conocimiento.

Los desafíos para las artes y la literatura son inmensos. A menudo se incurre en la creación de estereotipos insufribles, del tipo buenos versus malos, o migrantes versus la policía. No siempre es así. En La diáspora, una novela de Horacio Castellanos Moya, se lanza más bien una mirada irónica al desolado mundo de los exiliados salvadoreños en la ciudad de México en los años de la guerra civil, y se desnuda la escoria del oportunismo que se cultiva en nombre de valores humanistas. Desde luego, no todas las expresiones literarias provocadas por el mundo de la emigración contienen ‘el genio’ del que hablaba hace unos minutos. No podemos condescender con la mediocridad. Pero aún en esa ‘literatura sin genio’, descriptiva, sin exigencias estilísticas, sin personajes con densidad, apegada a las metodologías del testimonio, han comenzado a producirse algunas imágenes de nuestra identidad presente, sedimentos a los que recurrirá la memoria salvadoreña. Los dramas de la emigración de los campesinos y campesinas que ante el huracán de la guerra abandonaron sus lugares, como también las vicisitudes de los emigrantes hacia las ciudades norteamericanas, ya han comenzado a dibujarse en algunas de estas obras.

Seguramente el tiempo que tenemos por delante nos aguarda con nuevas celadas. Nuestra persistencia en tocar puertas que con demasiada frecuencia se nos cierran, pero que también se nos abren, quizás nos ha llegado a caracterizar como un pueblo que, en cualquier latitud, ejerce su derecho a ser, vivir y trabajar. El odio y el miedo son los que niegan los visados; bien lo
sabemos quienes tenemos que viajar por el mundo, como invitados o como tránsfugas, con el pasaporte azul salvadoreño. Por su historia, por su cultura, por su identidad, El Salvador debiera convertirse en una potencia en el estudio de las migraciones y tomar parte de las iniciativas internacionales que brinden protección a los nómadas del mundo. Y ello porque, como en una corriente sin fin, nuestros hijos — y de seguir las cosas como van, los hijos de nuestros hijos — al igual que nuestros abuelos, un buen día cerrarán tras de sí la puerta y hollarán los caminos de la diáspora. Al Norte o al Sur, no importa. Lo cierto es que se cumplirá el ciclo fatal de nuestra cultura. Y cuando dentro de veinte o cien años, una erupción volcánica o un nuevo deslizamiento de las placas tectónicas debajo de nuestros pies derriben los sueños de una sociedad entera, ojalá estemos en mejores condiciones para responder la pregunta que está a la base de esta larga disquisición mía sobre la huidiza memoria:

¿Por qué la imaginación sigue impotente el ritmo frenético de las gráficas en los sísmógrafos de nuestra tragedia?

Enfermos incurables de olvido, nuestra actual indiferencia ante la tragedia, como no sea dentro de una red de reproches y mentiras retóricas con olorcillo a mala política, nos debiera plantear no solamente preocupaciones políticas sino también estéticas. Solemos espetar toda clase de recriminaciones en general bien fundadas a los políticos, pero quizás no reparamos en que el lenguaje, ese arco voltaico capaz de unir las historias personales y colectivas con el pulso de la conciencia y con las devastaciones del amor y las pasiones, capaz de hundirse en los sustratos más recónditos de la memoria, con su secuela de perdurabilidad, no concurre al auxilio de nuestra soledad, de nuestra insatisfacción, para decírnos que la vida tiene sentido en medio de la tragedia y la vileza humana. Dormir un momento en la trinchera es, como la evasión del dolor, perfectamente legítimo; pero por suerte no es ese el único camino que suele tomar la imaginación.

Aunque se me acuse de escéptico, no veo abrirse la puerta de una era de confianza y esperanza genuinas; más bien, los futuros e inevitables retrocesos que derivarán de catástrofes y explosiones sociales cuy a cuenta regresiva ya ha comenzado, y que serán mensurables en términos de índices de desarrollo humano, ingresos per capita y demás términos de las atribuladas ciencias económicas, hoy por hoy parecen abismarnos a un camino con una sola salida: huir, a pie, en tren, a nado, o a bordo del imprevisible cohete de la imaginación, pero lejos, muy lejos de aquí.

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NOTAS


3 Fowler y Earnest, citado por George Hasemann y Gloria Lara Pinto en: ‘La Zona Central: Regionalismo e interacción’, en Historia General de

5 San Andrés habría sido una capital regional que llegó a dominar el fértil valle Zapotitán. Fue descubierta en 1910.

6 El sitio Joya de Cerén fue descubierto en 1976, las primeras excavaciones iniciaron en 1978 sacaron a la luz un conjunto habitacional de pobladores comunes extraordinariamente conservado por la acción de la ceniza volcánica que pudo ocurrir hace unos mil cuatrocientos años. Ha sido declarado Patrimonio Cultural de la Humanidad por UNESCO.


9 George Steiner, ‘En el castillo de Barba Azul’, (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1998), p. 17.


11 Browning, *El Salvador, la Tierra y el Hombre*.

12 El cuento se titula ‘Semos malos’ y forma parte del volumen *Cuentos de Barro, Narrativa completa I*, (San Salvador: CONCULTURA, 1999).

13 Me refiero al ‘poema de amor’, incluido en *Historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, (México, Siglo XXI, 1974).


15 Original mecanuscrito, citado con autorización de la autora.

SHAMING IN CHILD REARING AND ITS EFFECTS IN LATER LIFE

OLGA LORENZO

In my doctorate in creative writing at Melbourne University, I am researching shame in childhood from the perspective of the object relations branch of psychoanalysis (which emphasises the formative influences of the (m)other-child relationship) and looking at how shaming in childhood has been portrayed in literature. Here, however, I would like to reflect on a number of issues related to shaming and authoritarianism, not so much as someone looking into shame and psychoanalysis, but as a novelist, one whose writing draws heavily on personal experience.

Some of my thoughts are inspired by Mario Vargas Llosa’s work, especially his latest novel, The Feast of the Goat. And I want to share a few ideas about another great of Latin American literature, Gabriel García Márquez.

Some viewers may have noticed the signs on the streets of Havana in David Bradbury’s recent film, Fond Memories of Cuba. Above corner cafés, alongside badly patched roads, the billboards loom, proclaiming, ‘The Commander-in-Chief gives the orders’. Seen from our great distance in Australia, these assertions might seem quirky and relatively harmless. It takes a wilful leap of the imagination to ask oneself what sort of society would we have if such messages were omnipresent, and what it would say about our culture.

Mario Vargas Llosa’s novels and essays have delved into the phenomena of authoritarianism and dictatorship, as well as the Latin urge towards anarchy. He has referred to the ‘passionate irrationalism of the Latin tradition’, but his careful dissection in his novels of the forces that produce despots shows that if such forces are irrational, at least they are capable of being understood. His writing has explored and illuminated the results of machismo, and the consequences when fathers are abusive and children are reared with humiliation and shaming so that each generation bequeaths a withering of the soul to the subsequent one.

The Feast of the Goat is set in the Dominican Republic and concerns the three decades when Rafael Trujillo ruled the tiny Caribbean nation. As the novel opens Trujillo is long dead. The reader is introduced to Urania Cabral, a successful New York lawyer who has not visited or written home since she was 15 and the nuns bundled her out of the country. Her silence perplexes her aunts and cousins, who see Urania’s father as a loving and misunderstood man for whom things long ago stopped going well. When everything was rosy, el Señor Cabral was a member
of Trujillo’s inner circle of power. But Trujillo periodically ‘tested’ his lieutenants by subjecting them to public humiliation and censure, all the while keeping them in the dark about the cause of their opprobrium (usually nothing). Cabral proves more sensitive than others and instead of taking his humiliation quietly and so-called manfully, he suffers, begs and wheedles, and ultimately, in the vain hope of regaining favour, offers up his most cherished possession — his young daughter. This offer is made in the context of the extreme machismo of the culture surrounding Trujillo, where government ministers averted their eyes or frenetically travelled abroad when Trujillo came into their own homes to demand the sexual services of their wives. This, of course, was another way in which Trujillo humiliated his subordinates.

Theorists working on the subject of shame view humiliation as one of the many forms of shaming. Pattison situates shame, particularly chronic shame, ‘within the metaphorical ecology that pertains to defilement, pollution and stain’ contrasting it with the metaphorical ecology surrounding guilt, which he sees as ‘one of offence, debt and punishment’. He admits that in many ways modern notions of shame revolve around concepts of ‘internalised pollution’, a notion that also informs Kristeva’s ideas of abjection, which sees defilement and dirt as moving from the external into the internal sphere, thus becoming incorporated within the concept of the self.

An often overlooked result of chronic shaming in childhood is that the resultant, damaged self does not fully identify with society, living outside it and in this sense anarchic and asocial. Pattison observes that ‘chronically shamed people are pre-social and pre-moral’. Even when seeming to be moral, they have not really joined the moral community; they are not really other-regarding.

Vargas Llosa was born in Peru in 1936, and in 1990, established as one of Latin America’s leading writers and social commentators, ran for the presidency of Peru. He lost the election, perhaps because the electorate identified him with the cultured, moneyed class; they voted instead for Fujimori. It has been said that Vargas Llosa was devastated. There is little doubt that he has been an idealist. In the early sixties he saluted the Cuban revolution, believing it gave writers of all ideologies freedom to publish their work. In subsequent years, observing the imprisonment of dissident writers and the oppression of the populace, he turned away from Castro, moving from bewilderment to outrage. That free, dissident and creative writing has not flourished in Cuba is evident from the many writers who have fled the island to publish their work, including Reinaldo Arenas, who left because of persecution for both his homosexuality and his writing, and Zoe Valdés, whose Yocandra is a biting satire on Castro’s Cuba. Vargas Llosa allegedly fell out with García Márquez over his intimate friendship with Castro (legend has it that Vargas Llosa struck García Márquez in the face, a claim that Vargas Llosa neither publicly affirms nor denies).

It is interesting to compare the two writers. Both contend for the title of Latin America’s greatest living novelist. Both have been fascinated by the theme of the caudillo, the generalissimo, the dictator. Along these lines, the Nobel prize-winning García Márquez has offered us No One Writes to the Colonel, The Autumn of the Patriarch, and One Hundred Years of Solitude. In these one often finds a barely
concealed admiration for the trappings and excesses of power. In the non-fictional work *News of a Kidnapping*, García Márquez wrote: 'Power is a double edged sword ... it generates a state of pure exaltation and, at the same time, its opposite: the search for an irresistible, fugitive joy, comparable only to the search for an idealised love that one longs for but fears, pursues but never attains'.

This distinct romanticising of power, twining it with romantic love, perhaps offers some insight into García Márquez's relationship with the Cuban dictator. As well, what García Márquez has said he admires about Castro may be instructive. García Márquez cites his lack of orthodoxy, for instance, and his spontaneity — for many years Castro governed without an office, roaming the island with no set schedule. What others would call disorder bordering on irresponsible government here is considered a virtue, as is Castro's longwindedness; his speeches, as evident in *Fond Memories of Cuba*, are narcissistic displays that can go on for as long as seven hours. In *My Friend, Fidel* (1990), García Márquez proclaims his awe for what others might call intemperance. He describes a lunch where Castro finished a huge meal by devouring 18 scoops of ice cream. 'I believe he is one of the greatest idealists of our time', he writes, extolling Castro's 'nearly mystical conviction that the greatest achievement of the human being is the proper formation of conscience'. This of course was said about a dictator whose regime had already imprisoned dissidents such as the poet Armando Valladares for upwards of 20 years and handed out death sentences to others.¹⁰ 'I have seen the most self-assured people lose their poise in his company', writes García Márquez, without wondering if this has anything to do with the fact that Castro is head of a single-party, authoritarian state.¹¹

The admiring portrait García Márquez draws of Castro seems to be a caricature of those twin failings in the Latin American temper, the urge towards authoritarianism on the one hand and intemperance, closely aligned to an anarchic urge, on the other. It is interesting, in this context, that Castro was born into circumstances that were considered shameful at the time. His father, Angel, came from Galicia, the wild north-west corner of Spain, a place, as Geyer writes, ‘of exaggerated pride and of the deep sense of shame that lurks like a shadow behind that pride’. Angel Castro migrated to Cuba as an adventurous twenty-year-old, leaving behind a Spain that had moulded his character. As V.S. Pritchett wrote, the Spanish considered themselves ‘the master-race of the world, the founders of the first great empire to succeed the Roman Empire ... They fought to preserve, and for a long time successfully did preserve, the spirit of the Middle Ages.’¹² As a Spaniard in the newly independent island, Angel Castro was an outsider but he managed to carve for himself a large and profitable sugar *hacienda*, often by stealing land. He married a respectable schoolteacher and had two children, but his wife left when she realised he had been having an affair with the housemaid, Lina Ruiz. Angel Castro continued to live, unmarried, with Ruiz, and it was in these circumstances that Fidel was born. As Geyer writes, ‘never — not in any writing or in any interview or in any reference — did Fidel ever refer to the fact that he and his siblings were bastards in a Cuba that ... was Roman Catholic and Spanish
Castro was my father’s classmate at Colegio La Salle in Havana, where he was mocked for being a double bastard — illegitimate, and the son of a Galician, or gallego, as they were disparagingly called. Shaming and its product, internalised shame, would have been Castro’s constant companions.

García Márquez’s antecedents, like Castro’s paternal line — and like my own father’s — all originate from that inhospitable corner of Spain, Galicia, Franco’s birthplace and home. Geyer writes that:

To many people it seemed ‘natural’ that Castro and Franco would have hated each other; one was a Communist, the other was a Fascist Falangist who had defeated the classic Marxist threat in the Spanish Civil War and then ruled his country with the iron hand of the Catholic caudillo. But such neat ideological classifications most often lie. As a matter of fact, the two twentieth-century strongmen with nineteenth-century roots in Galicia had been filled with admiration for each other for many years. They had yearned to meet, and when Franco died, Castro decreed a full week of official mourning in Cuba.14

Vargas Llosa comes at authoritarianism from a different angle from García Márquez. He spent his early childhood believing his father dead. His parents were divorced, a source of shame in his mother’s Catholic household. Later, when his parents reconciled, Vargas Llosa grew to hate his father for his bullying.15 But such formative experiences, rather than turning him into an authoritarian or despotic personality, seem to have laid the ground for insights that generated great writing. In The Feast of the Goat, Urania asks her father how Trujillo could have dominated and emasculated cultured, educated, intelligent men. In her imagination, her father replies:

After reading, listening, investigating, thinking, you’ve come to understand how so many millions of people, crushed by propaganda and lack of information, brutalised by indoctrination and isolation, deprived of free will and even curiosity by fear and the habit of servility and obsequiousness, could worship Trujillo. Not merely fear him but love him, as children eventually love authoritarian parents, convincing themselves that the whippings and beatings are for their own good.16

Indeed, Trujillo beat, abused and humiliated his son. Undermined, Ramfis grew into a feckless playboy. But this is the same Ramfis who returns to the Dominican Republic to avenge his father’s murder, meting out horrendous cruelty. Here we have a terrible but compelling portrayal of what happens when there is no real insight into the way a child’s self is twisted by shaming, and how the rage is stored within the weakened self, to re-emerge in the bullying of others. In the gravity of his work, Vargas Llosa, to my mind, sometimes leaves García Márquez looking like a dilettante.

The historical forces that inclined Spain towards authoritarianism, and also towards its paradoxical counterpart, anarchy, are varied, sometimes subtle and sometimes overt. Pritchett referred to ‘the Spanish temper’. Doubtless the Spanish culture was influenced by the Islamic invasion of Spain, and the nature of Islam, and the nature of medieval Spain, and the rise of tiny fiefdoms, and the Spanish hidalgo — who had an Arabic counterpart. Other factors were the uneasy partnership of Jew, Christian and Moslem in medieval
Spain, and the Reconquista, and the Inquisition, and inflexible, intolerant Catholicism. And the way Spain entered the counter-reformation, with a fortress mentality, the mark of an embattled society. These forces had their poisoned flowering centuries later in the Civil War, so eloquently bringing to the fore all that had quietly simmered for so long.

In Latin America, it may have had to do with the Conquista, and the nature and social organisation of the indigenous cultures that were conquered, and, again, the Spanish temper. One must also consider how the rule of law was imposed, and whether the conquerors brought their womenfolk with them. Unlike the English, who generally dispersed as colonists looking for greener pastures, were transported as convicts (both male and female), or migrated with their families fleeing religious persecution, the Spanish colonisers were more often seeking wealth and largely left their women behind in Spain. They bred instead with the indigenous people and, when these had been exterminated by toil and disease (as in Cuba), with the African slaves. This created a more mestizo and sometimes a more racially tolerant culture. A working-class Cuban term of affection for women, regardless of their skin colour, is mi negra — my black woman. But perhaps leaving the women of higher social status back home in Spain also increased male feelings of superiority, and disparagement of the feminine, and the cult of machismo, which goes so well with authoritarian repression. In Feast of the Goat, Urania speaks of Trujillo’s 31 years in power during which, she says, ‘all the evil we had carried with us since the Conquest became crystallised’.¹⁷

The roots of authoritarianism in Latin America may also have to do with Simon Bolivar, our great South American liberator, who expressed the opinion that extraordinary men — the caudillos — not democracy, would lead the nations of Spanish America forward (in this he was no different from the United States founding fathers who conceived the electoral college as a means of defence against democracy in the broadest possible sense).

A Road Well Travelled (by Doran, Satterfield et al.) is a collection of interviews with Cuban-American women.¹⁸ One of the things the researchers reported was the difficulty they had getting older Cuban women to express their feelings. One woman said, ‘In Cuba, you don’t ask yourself all kinds of questions like, who am I? What do I want with my life, and why? Here (in the United States) it is natural to have a psychoanalyst, or a clergyman, or somebody you can trust, and you know, go and empty your garbage.’ It is significant that she describes expressing feelings as emptying garbage — feelings are obviously something associated with the shameful, contaminated and abject. The Cuban women interviewed nevertheless managed to convey some sense of the restrictions of their culture. The authors wrote, ‘These women came from a background of strict upbringing at home and at school, with their lives all but predetermined. Daughters were expected to live at home.’ And to stay there. This was the case in my own experience. During a visit to my parents, my husband was bemused when my father took him aside and told him, ‘Don’t let Olga drive the car. Olga must not drive.’ I was 35 at the time, and the mother of three. I had been driving, with an unblemished record, for 15 years.

What was particularly interesting in the interviews with Cuban American women was how these women grew
emotionally, partly because of the challenges posed by a culture that allowed women to be less dependent on their male relations and allowed both genders somewhat freer expression of the deeply personal.

Former psychoanalyst Alice Miller, in For Your Own Good — the Roots of Violence in Child-Rearing, writes that:

[To be able to] recognise the poisonous effects of ... upbringing and not balk at what they are ... requires a measure of tolerance which does not automatically obtain in every country, nor in certain families, where fanatic ideas on child rearing are applied beginning in infancy. A little less rigidity and a minimum of democracy are therefore needed if the suffering of the citizen in the state and the child in the family is to be articulated to any degree at all.19

These are some of the ideas that I set out to explore in my novels. If they are anything, they are a sort of cri de coeur against the emotional and physical abuse of children, which is one of the hallmarks of shaming and humiliation, and the widespread ignorance of what constitutes abuse. One of my central tenets is expressed in The Rooms in My Mother's House. This is about the father, Pedro, and his relationship with his adolescent children, Ana and Carlos:

Ana had learned to goad Pedro, to challenge him when he was in one of his rages. When he lifted his hand to hit her she said, Yes, that's right, hit a woman! You're having a bad day, a bad year, a bad life go ahead, take it out on me. She did not flinch, did not cry, did not take her eyes off his face. The look in them astonished Pedro and he could not believe her words. His hand wilted like a man's passion and he stopped hitting her so that he would not have to hear her challenges. He roared that she was twisted and as ugly and insane as her Abuela Dolores, that they both had the same horse face and were both impossible. Then he walked away. But Carlos still flinched when he roared, still made to run when his hand snaked out. Carlos was thin and not quite as tall as Pedro and he was gentle, gentle and noble, and he infuriated Pedro beyond endurance — drove him fuera de quicio — each time he flinched. Pedro could not allow anything in his son that had been denied him, because that would have touched his deepest pain. To keep it buried, he had to repeat what had been done to him. Any weakness, any misdemeanour, any infraction had to be punished severely, any gentleness quashed. He had to make him a man. He had to beat Carlos, for the sake of young Pedro, who had once been beaten by his own parents.20

An authoritarian and restrictive upbringing shames the self and impinges on self-confidence, leading to a disassociation from our innermost feelings. If we are not allowed to express ourselves freely because of intimidation, humiliation and shaming in our early years, we learn to stifle our feelings. The self becomes lost to us; we become imprisoned in our own bodies, victims of the repression we have internalised. In severe cases, such as we see in Vargas Llosa’s portrait of Trujillo and his sons, and in what is known about Fidel Castro, it leads to a cutting off from our social obligations and from fellow feeling, so that the individual is both anarchic, disrespectful of rules fairly governing social intercourse, and authoritarian, repeating the shaming and bullying that was the hallmark of his own upbringing.
ENDNOTES


4 Pattison, Shame, p. 88.


6 Pattison, Shame, p. 12.


8 Cowley, ‘Dictators Be Damned’.


10 In March 2003, 75 dissidents were arrested in Cuba and sentenced to jail terms of up to 28 years. According to the Melbourne Age (4 September 2003) ‘they had called for peaceful democratic reforms to Cuba’s one-party system’.


13 Geyer, Guerrilla Prince, p. 25.

14 Geyer, Guerrilla Prince, p. 342.

15 Cowley, ‘Dictators Be Damned’.


17 Vargas Llosa, The Feast of the Goat, p. 46.


In most cultures the dead and their living descendants are held in dialogic relationship. Therefore to fail to carry out what is culturally required for one’s family dead can be exquisitely painful for those unable to do so. A Czech Jewish woman related how she could not return to her village birthplace to salute the 48 family members killed by the Nazis and their sympathisers, prevented not by a physical force but the thought of meeting, accidentally, the persons or their descendants who had participated in the slaughter. Croatian villages destroyed during the 1990s war are still sown with anti-personnel mines, in the cemeteries as much as around the town halls. It will be beyond the lifetime of the old people before the mines are cleared. But the Chinese, with the help of a priest, may summon the soul of an ancestor from an Asian grave to an Australian temple, where the spirit, though removed from its earthly vessel, will rest and remain at peace.

Forgotten and abandoned, too, are many of the graves in Jewish cemeteries of Nazi occupation, for those who had the care of tending them were themselves obliterated. Other European Jewish cemeteries deteriorate because the descendants of the buried fled into exile and have not returned.

Some 7000 Jewish Holocaust survivors came to Australia before 1950, for many of whom the act of return to the ruined cemeteries of Germany, Poland, Hungary or the former Czechoslovakia has been one of appalled discovery rather than loving maintenance. The children of exiles, groping at the meaning of the destruction of the dead as well as the living, wrote poetic and poignant expressions of their anguish under the interdiction of their old people: You must understand. But you cannot, you were not there.

One such child of exiles was the Australian writer Arnold Zable, who visited the Polish city of Bialystock. Near the city, since 1943 almost empty of Jews, was an ancient cemetery. Zable, searching for his ancestors, walked in widening circles for an hour before he found the first grave, and wrote:
Soon I have located about a dozen, slung between shrubs and long grass. There are no headstones, not a single Hebraic letter, merely body length slabs, others lying like solidified slugs glistening in the sun.

Perhaps this is how it has always been for descendants of lost families: we search within a tangle of aborted memories while stumbling towards a mythical home which seems to elude us as it recedes into false turns and dead ends. For while the old man talks I am overcome by an uncanny feeling that there are many of us at this moment — sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, grandchildren — wandering country roads and city streets, or picking our way through forest undergrowth to uncover mould-encrusted tombstones.

So in Latin America, where in many countries temporary flight from anarchy or a new and vengeful government has become expected and almost institutionalised. Permanent enforced exile is different, not least because sometimes absence is not expected to be forever. People in flight rarely think of the long-term consequences of a permanent departure, but for many an ageing exile, the birth land calls louder every year. The unlooked-for meditation on places once loved and objects abandoned becomes an ache transfixed in a transplanted culture never quite matching the old, the mind alighting upon friends unvisited, a family ageing and uncared for. Mystification, ignorance and finally indifference overtakes the succeeding generations of the children of exiles.

In Cuba many of those who fled from Castro’s revolution had already spent periods in Mexico, or Guatemala or the US. Often women and children didn’t bother to leave while the men endured — or enjoyed — a year or two away from domestic or workplace responsibility. In 1959 they left Castro’s Cuba in the same expectation that they would triumphantly return within a year or two. The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion was the first intimation that they might remain forever in exile, their lost places forlorn, their culture truncated: and the graves of their ancestors uncared for.

The family tombs, like the Croatian and the Jewish, were neglected in the first abrupt departure. Gradually they infiltrated the consciences of Miami exiles who realised, too late, that responsibilities towards the ancestors, the pain of severed relationships and the obligations of family honour would remain forever unfulfilled. They imagined, we suppose, the once elegant family tombs in Havana’s principal cemetery, Cementerio Colón, as the photographs of the dead gathered dust, the paths grew weedy and the inscriptions faded, while over all settled an air of melancholy neglect.

It is only recently that they have begun to learn what has in reality occurred to the tombs of Cementerio Colón. What began as a twinge of the conscience has become one of the heaviest costs of permanent exile.

Cementerio Colón, Havana, is one of the largest, and still most dramatic, cemeteries in the whole of Latin America. It is by no means the best kept: that of Santiago De Cuba is much better maintained, but since perhaps two million people have been buried in Cementerio Colón since it opened in 1879, the authorities have good excuse for its comparative disrepair. And they are trying hard to restore it. The City Historian Eusebio Leal, who has charge of the general reconstruction of Old Havana, and
who began the restorations of the cemetery in the mid 1980s, is said to wander its huge area planning which areas are next to be restored. The oily pools and unpleasant smells which disfigured the cemetery during the terrible Special Period beginning in 1991 (in which Cuba, on the departure of the Russians, was left without resources) have all but vanished. The guidebook claim that the Cementerio Colón is ‘the best monumental architectural cemetery in the world’, may be an exaggeration, but the central avenues are splendid indeed.8

It’ll cost the tourist a dollar to enter, nothing if you’re visiting a relative.

The first impact on the visitor is blinding white, heat, few shade trees and nowhere to sit. Straight in front, at the axes of the principal avenues Avenida Cristobal Colón, Obispo Espada and Obispo Fray Jacinto, stands the Central Chapel apparently modelled on Il Duomo in Florence. On every side rectangular streets lead geometrically to the cemetery’s 56 hectares, designed by the architect Calixto de Loira to define the rank and social status of the dead with distinct areas: priests, soldiers, brotherhoods, the wealthy, the poor, infants, victims of epidemics, pagans and the condemned.9 The best preserved and grandest tombs are on or near these central avenues and their axes.

The first casual stroll from the entrance to the Central Chapel reveals pride and achievement in the city’s and the nation’s culture. Elegant sculptures of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, Cuba’s patron saint, form the focus of many a monument. A breathtaking nineteenth-century memorial recalls the bravery of the city’s firemen. The massive Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, a graceful marble open-air pantheon containing the remains of national heroes is guarded by the two saluting bronze figures. A perambulation down the main thoroughfare and through the chapel leaves little to suggest that the country has been under the rule of a revolutionary government for 44 years. Nor does the city cemetery, from this vantage point, bear indication of the sudden and permanent departure of the many hundreds of sons and daughters whose task it was to care for the family tombs of their ancestors.

Away from the central avenues the cemetery begins to offer the historian something more than national heroes and a range of architectural styles from classical to modernist to Renaissance to bizarre. Its calculated resemblance to a real city, of central plaza, administration, grand avenues, humble streets and suburbs from very rich to very poor, speaks the life which in pre-revolutionary Havana existed outside the cemetery walls. In the Latin American Catholic tradition, what was mounted about the tomb was frequently rather more important than what the tomb contained. In the richer precincts, tombs competed with each other in opulence, architectural daring or familial piety, or trumpeted the family achievement. And of course the cemetery, like the city, is a place of miracles. Doña Amelia de Gloria Castellano (Amelia Goyre) died in childbirth in 1901 with her baby buried beside her. When the coffin was opened, the baby lay in its mother’s arms.

Stroll down, say, to a quiet corner in Calle 10. A man has stepped from his 1956 Chevrolet to place a bunch of flowers on a well kept grave. Over here, look at the marble figures of remarkable grace and feeling. In the distance an exhumation is taking place, for a coffin has ful-
filled its allotted two years in the ground and the space is needed for another burial next week. An extended family group of a hundred people are taking part in what is effectively a second funeral as the coffin emerges from the ground. In the next few days the bones will be reburied in a cement box and placed in storage with the hundreds of thousands of others that can be seen stacked in several more or less discreet parts of the cemetery. After seeing a program depicting an exhumation in Cementerio Colón on television, Nedda de Anhalt wrote:

Unas manos desgajan los restos de carne
Putrefacta de un esqueleto
Que aseguran es el de mi padre.
Pero yo se que esos huesos
Pertenecen a una desconocida.
Cubro con un pañuelo
Mi boca y nariz
Mientras con la otra mano
Sostengo en alto
Una rosa.
(Some hands tear off the rest of the
Putrefying flesh of a skeleton
They assure me that it belongs to my father.
But I know that these bones
Belong to an unknown woman.
With my mouth and nose
Covered with a handkerchief
I hold out from above
A rose.)

And just over here a group of cemetery workers are disinterring half a dozen coffins of — who knows who they were? The coffins seem to have neither identification nor mourners. The men toss them around as they lever off the more valuable lid from the unwanted pine box. The contents spill in ungainly heaps over the ground. The remains of the corpse, clothes, bones, loved objects, and faded letters blow about in the wind, to wait, while the pedestrian hurriedly chooses another path, to be shovelled into the trailer.

Such sights should not be altogether surprising in a nation at times desperately poor, without a crematorium, in an overcrowded cemetery with attitudes to death rather more frank and disclosed than in Anglo Saxon countries. Nobody has resources in Cuba to spend on the preservation of family graves. The best that can be expected is to keep the tomb swept and tidy, change the flowers and to replace the funerary objects decaying with age.

Yes, abandoned tombs can be restored by the state. But state finance or heritage consciousness won’t fill the empty tombs, replace the photographs, or do anything to restore the personal honour that once belonged to the exile families, nor still the sense that ancestors have been abandoned to decay and destruction by the people who should have cared for them. And the state certainly won’t spend any money on the tombs of those judged to have been enemies of the revolution.

Consciousness of unfulfilled obligations and besmirched honour hang heavily on exile communities. To preserve those obligations was the reason why Cuban exiles in Miami drank a toast each new year’s eve to ‘Next year in Cuba’. Not to do so was to show that one had given up the hope of return, or as years went by, the pretence of the hope of return. Not to do so meant that the exiles had forsaken the sacred trust to care for their inheritance, not least the tombs of their own parents and grandparents. Some Cuban Americans, indeed, sent large sums of money from Spain or
the United States for tombs to be re-waxed to prevent the entry of moisture, or to repair the chapels and mausoleums. The first indication of overseas concern is the inscription ‘clausurada’ on several tombs. It means ‘closed’, indicating that someone has paid a sufficient sum for the coffins inside either not be removed, or not to have other coffins placed upon them. Almost certainly that instruction, and the sum in US dollars, has been sent from abroad. Others, from abroad, ask their friends to place flowers on the grave of their mother on Mother’s Day.

Most revealing whether or not a tomb has a local family protector, is the condition of the shrines, little chapels usually with windows and a glass or metal door. In these were placed, at the time of interment, perhaps a Madonna, devotional objects, a shelf holding several photographs, urns, flowers — and a broom. Some contain curtains, a chair, personal items of the deceased, so that the tomb becomes simultaneously a private room sealed — it was hoped — for eternity. A tomb well kept by local families may be in disrepair, but the flowers will be changed from month to month, the vases and photographs dusted, rust and water stains scrubbed off. The family members will be too busy keeping their heads above Cuba’s perilous economic waters to spend money on upkeep even if the materials for repair were available.

It is the others on which our tour is focused, of much worse condition. These are the unprotected tombs and chapels of the Havanans who have abruptly departed within the last 44 years and have not returned. A stroll in any direction from Colón Avenue will make apparent the differences.

We begin in the Northwestern quadrant.

This tomb — as can be seen by peering in the window — has been stripped of everything movable. The remaining urns, once white and fixed to the floor, are stained with lichen or dust. Walk onwards a few paces to another where a jagged triangular piece has been ripped from the floor of this chapel which forms the roof of the tomb below. The door is locked, making it impossible to see what lies beneath. Pieces of the smashed segment lie about, and a lump of cardboard. At some point the space has been swept, and a neat but mysterious pile of grey and white stony rubbish lies on the remaining section of the floor.

In this next grave, 20 metres further, the curtains once adorning the chapel-tomb have rotted and turned dark with age. The sagging holes and blackening fragments dropping onto the marble bench beneath lend the tomb an aspect more of macabre mutability than perpetual peace. A photograph on the shelf has inexplicably fallen on its face. Opposite, another tomb is entered by an exterior staircase which appears not to have been disturbed for 40 years: one would need a machete to make an entrance.

Continue further to the next street. The glass door of this chapel is smashed: only an iron grille prevents entry to the colourfully painted Madonna, who, standing on a plinth, almost touches the barrel vaulted roof. She’s still beautiful, but is surrounded by a wheelbarrow, tools, cement bags, boxes and lumps of monumental masonry. Oddly she does not seem so out of place here in the detritus as the Madonna in that empty violated tomb who presides over nothing.

The glass windows in this tomb have evidently been broken and crudely replaced with hardboard. Plaster falls off a
corner to reveal the mundane brick beneath. Another adjacent chapel has a smashed and broken door. One can enter to peer four metres to the bottom of the vault. All its former occupants have been removed. Why? Where to? When? When the city’s regular churches were closed or politically difficult to enter, individuals sometimes used tombs as a private or family shrine, and perhaps still do. But why remove the coffin if the space was not intended for another? Perhaps that topless, empty chamber was robbed first of its Carrara marble. Perhaps someone in downtown Havana is enjoying dinner on a very heavy white tabletop. The Cuban people have lived through some desperate times since 1959.

The sudden cut-off from the long dynasties expected and assumed to flourish in Cuba for ever, is never so clear as in the mausoleum of the family Nuñez Galvez. It’s an avant-garde though now deteriorating 1950s piece of architectural bravura. The names of the deceased Nuñez Galvez family follow in an orderly procession until they halt abruptly six months before the revolution:

NUÑEZ ALMAGUER AGO 3 DE 1898
NUÑEZ PEREZ ABR 4 DE 1903
— TERO CARRION ENE 12 DE 1908
NUÑEZ PEREZ NOV 22 DE 1912
NUÑEZ QUINTERO ENE 12 DE 1932
NUÑEZ BASULTO JUL 17 DE 1958

The most strikingly modern and one of the most beautiful 1950s tombs in the cemetery is the mausoleum of the journalists of the newspaper El Pais, the Reporters Association Pantheon. The above ground level section is a semi-elliptical glass, three metres deep. Glass panels form both sides of an entrance chamber, perhaps to represent the transparency of truth. The reinforcing beams allude dramatically to the shape of a cross. Although the architect has installed a little window into the tomb at knee height on Calle J, it will be worth entering this arresting edifice. Mounting the seven steps to the formal terrace reveals that some of the glass panels have been smashed making an easy entrance.

Below the entrance level area a staircase descends to two levels below ground. Descend half a dozen steps as the strong Havana sun weakens and filters into columns of airy dust. In this sombre light it’s difficult to subdue the emotions, for the tomb bears an ambience both sinister and strange. The weird inscriptions on a wall and pillars, and a general air of abandonment we’ll return to after investigating the bottom level. The shadowy darkening staircase continues downwards to invite the curious and the strong minded.

To the bottom chamber and perhaps to what one should expect in a country having endured more than one Special Period of starvation and neglect. Strange groups of letters are painted on the roof, KKK, and a word beginning NEOR. Lidless cement boxes of bones lie everywhere. About half the chambers reserved for them along one of the walls are filled, the names of the deceased painted crudely on the outside. A dozen boxes lie on their sides or upside down, their contents spilling onto the floor. One lying at the bottom of the stairs has several human bones emptied in the middle of the floor resting on a pile of tiny white and grey fragments. So that’s what those pieces are in the empty tomb on Calle F, parts of exhumed and destroyed bodies! One can imagine the course of events: a coffin in the empty tomb in the northwestern quadrant evidently was raised
and emptied onto the floor of the chapel and the corpse ransacked — perhaps in the hope of extracting its gold teeth or jewellery, perhaps for the skull. Probably the robbery and desecration was discovered soon after by the cemetery workmen, who perfunctorily swept the remains into a cardboard box and left the rest in a pile on the floor.

Round the corner of this bottom chamber is a pile of another dozen boxes, their contents spilled over each in a grotesque pile of leg bones, clothes, hands, skulls, and other unrecognisable body pieces. Sprawled on top of the extraordinary charnel is what appears to be the blackened bottom half of a naked human form.

Surely this is the other side of the coin of life. The bottom level of the Tomb of the Reporters is not meant for anyone other than men working in a preparation area more casual than disrespectful, where labourers reminiscent of Hamlet’s sardonic gravedigger go about their business.

Now ascend the stairs to the first level to the opaque filtering light and the mysterious poems. A huge, high chamber, one side of which contains the words and markings, the other a grid of burial chambers. They are like the spaces below but much bigger, a metre square, in which a coffin was intended to be pushed and the entrance sealed. Some spaces are indeed sealed and the generous proportions and elegance of the chamber mark the interior as well as the glass ellipse as one of the most exquisite mausoleums in the land. A first glance reveals what the tomb was meant to be. A second glance reveals what it now is. A third pinpoints the nightmare of all those charged with the care, across many continents and many centuries, of the revered and solemn dead.

Some of the spaces intended for coffins are empty. Were they once filled? Several others have been broken into with a pick or a sledge hammer. Some appear to contain whole coffins, others only the black and shattered remains. Pieces of human body lie athwart the smashed coffins or on the floor. What looks like a rib cage is half inside a coffin, half out. Small and large pieces of bone and dark flesh are scattered in the shadows.

Written on the wall, mainly in what looks to be the same elegant hand, in black paint, are a number of verses. Some are inscribed four metres from the floor, way out of reach of a normal hand. All are weirdly poetic reflections on death and cemeteries. One reads:

Al fin de la vida pensamientos  
Hasta entonces no pensados  
Surgen claramente del espíritu  
Son como genios chistosos que se  
Posan deslumbrantes en la cima  
De lo pasado  
(At the end of life thoughts  
Unimagined until now  
Rise clearly from the spirit  
They are like whimsical beings which  
Throw dazzling light on the summit  
Of what has been)

Others read, ‘Life is not only a track, rather it’s a form of living for those who know how to live it’. The most sinister of all, hard to read because it so high, declares ‘Those who are condemned to die should not be condemned for defending the right to live’. Who could have written such sentiments in such bizarre surroundings? Was the Pantheon — is the Pantheon — a chamber of torture as well?
as death? Were the Reporters selected for some after-death punishment, and by whom? Or does this appalling desecration flow from some independent motive? The deep silence, the heavy air, the threatening lowering violence, the enigmatic texts, the shadowy light, the baleful ambience, the spiritual menace which threatens at any moment to materialise: surely this most sinister of tombs deserves a less prosaic lament than the lament of a Miami exile after visiting the cemetery:

Al parecer serán tomadas medidas inmediatas de vigilancia con un cuerpo de serenos para que los disfuntos puedan descansar en paz … y sus familiares también. (It appears that they will take immediate measures to establish cemetery vigilantes so that the dead can rest in peace … and also their families.)

One Cuban American website on Cementerio Colón concludes with the observation:

El Cementerio Colón es un testigo mudo del deterioro de nuestro país después de la revolución de la desgracia del comunismo.

(The Colón Cemetery is a testimony to the deterioration of our country since the revolution of the disgrace of communism.)

But to limn the horrors of the shadowy Tomb of the Reporters is not necessarily to make a political judgement on Castro’s government. There is no indication that the government wishes the cemetery to be in such a state; indeed the advance of Afro-Cuban mortuary practices is decidedly unwelcome to the regime. Rather we should embrace the universal human emotion that the bones of the dead deserve to be left in peace, and that the rights and wrongs of revolution and exile ought to be irrelevant beyond the grave.

Outside in what the Australian poet Judith Wright calls the strict chains of day, amidst the majestic ordered solemnity of Avenida Obispo Fray Jacinto, the Tomb of the Reporters seems far away. But it’s not. Take a half glance towards the junction of Calle J and Calle 14 and the sun will be glinting from the tall glass wall and its elegant entrance. The Tomb of the Reporters is always present at the edge of vision, in the blink of an eyelid, a moment in the mind, just a step from the broad sunlight of the serene and honoured monuments of this Avenue into its gathered darknesses.

Here in the full heat and light of midday stands the severely dignified tomb of the family Prió Socorrás, containing the remains of the mother of the last freely elected president of the Republic, Carlos Prió Socorrás. Probably the tomb has not been opened since her interment. Prió, an exile, not from Castro, but from his predecessor, Fulgencio Batista, left the country early in 1952. The family is lucky that its tomb stands in the central avenue making an undiscovered desecration or robbery unlikely.

Where is the family continuity? Where is the tomb of her more famous son? Prió lived and died in the United States. In leaving his relatives dead and uncared for in the old country, he lived and died in the new.

Those exiles who for much of their lives were haunted by the memories of deep filial obligations unfulfilled, aged in a new country; and as they aged they became preoccupied with a personal.
problem yet more grievous: their own deaths in alien soil. Carlos Prio Socarrás and thousands like him are buried in Miami. They died in a new country. That’s where our story continues.

NOTES


7 Zable, *Jewels and Ashes*, p. 79.


10 www.elateje.com/0307/poesia030701.htm


INTRODUCTION

In May 2002, as I was nearing the end of an eighteen-month stay in Cuba, I was invited to attend an artistic performance of popular traditions in Santiago de Cuba. As with folkloric recitals in hundreds of hotels, cabarets, cultural centres and nightclubs throughout the island, the spotlight focused on the most exotic, visually stimulating aspects of the Afro-Cuban religion Santería. It was a night of drumming, dancing, spirit possessions and, to the fascinated shock of many spectators, an animal sacrifice. The program for the performance, printed in English and Spanish, noted the central importance of these ritual activities to the practice of Santería in Cuba.

The following week I returned to the house of Miguel, a priest of Santería and my principal percussion teacher, with whom I had lived for 12 months in Havana. When Miguel saw the program from the performance, he commented that the facts it presented about the deities of Santería were inconsistent with the religion’s spiritual teachings. But, to my surprise, he also laughed and said that to get away with this, the performance directors must be adept salespeople and true cabrones (literally ‘bastards’, though used in Cuba to signify cunning). Miguel dealt frequently with foreigners, from percussion students and anthropologists, to filmmakers and tour operators impressed with his lively explanations of Santería folklore.

But Miguel also had a substantial local religious following. He owned a set of sacred batá drums, consecrated by the renowned Pancho Quinto, and his house operated as a centre of religious activity in Old Havana, drawing a wide range of relatives and friends into a network of community support. The ceremonial gatherings that took place at his house maintained the spiritual and material well-being of participants: the pork, chicken, and goat meat used in ceremonial offerings was divided and shared among participants, and ‘derechos’ (fees) were paid to those who helped facilitate these occasions.

This kind of attention to social welfare has been central to the practice of Afro-Cuban religions since the establishment of mutual aid societies called cabildos in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.1 Through the economic crisis of the 1990s, grassroots social support has remained an important focus of Santería communities and networks, in some instances drawing them into collaboration with state urban development institutions.2 But some commentators argue that this historic
capacity for collective action, which depends on strong and loyal networks of community support, is eroding with the religion’s recent commercial renaissance. Rogelio Martínez Furé, Miguel Barnet, Carlos Moore, and others note that the appearance of sacred ceremonial actions in folklore cabarets and hotel nightclubs is trivialising and diluting the religion’s social and spiritual cohesion.3

Foreign interest in Afro-Cuban religious exotica has swelled and subsided over the centuries, peaking prominently between 1920 and 1940,4 but the expansion of tourism in Cuba since the early 1990s has generated unprecedented commercial appeal around Santería and other historic Cuban traditions. According to Eusebio Leal, Old Havana’s equivalent of Mayor and the director of the Office of the Historian of the City:

Tourism is here to stay, and it will increase a hundredfold when the blockade is abolished. North Americans want to come here because we have something they do not: art, architecture, and historic traditions all within Old Havana. That said, we reject the idea of turning our historic centre into a theme park and novelty show.5

Santería stands out prominently as one of these historic traditions, but not all its practitioners approve of its new, marketable face. Some have joined together to rediscover a more traditional, African form of the religion by researching its historical foundations and refusing outright to perform its sacred arts on the folklore stage. Through this commitment, they aim to ‘rescue’ their tradition by closely defining its spiritual and social teachings, while staying loyal to community interests and solidarities.

It is tempting to take sides in the debate: is an expanding entertainment industry fundamentally damaging Santería’s role in community welfare, or is resistance to commodification effectively maintaining the religion’s spiritual efficacy and capacity for social support among its followers? I wish to explore the middle ground between these antitheses through a series of short narrative anecdotes. Drawing from Fernando Ortiz I will suggest that a less essentialised reading of the situation may be possible when theorised in terms of transculturation.

Ortiz developed the concept of transculturation in 1940 to account for the interpenetration of Spanish and African cultural influences in Cuban national identity. The dominant model of cross-cultural contact at the time was acculturation, which predicted the inevitable assimilation of non-industrial societies into the currents of an expanding European political economy. Ortiz’s transculturation, on the other hand, acknowledged the ongoing influence of the customs, traditions, and cultures of all participants in scenarios of cross-cultural contact and exchange.

By examining the issue of religious commercialisation through the analytic lens of transculturation I hope to show that Santería’s predicament is conditioned not by tourism or tradition alone but by a convergence of distinct cultural and economic values in collaborative activities. In the negotiated episodes of daily life, the effects of film contracts and cabaret performances on religious communities are only one half of the story; the other half is about the attempts of religious practitioners to assert their own influences and values in the collaborative projects that result. The activities of Miguel in Old Havana are a good example of this. His skilful orchestration of
presentations and meetings to accommodate the diverse needs of foreign film makers, percussion students, aspiring initiates, and his local religious following show an interpenetration of commercial, community, and personal objectives. The convergence of these objectives in common activities shows transculturation in motion.

SACRED THEATRE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITION

Although I’m seated in the sixth row of the open-air amphitheatre, I can see the stage clearly. The batá drummers are at the back of the stage, the singer (akpón) to their left, and the dancers, all women, in front. Dressed from head to toe in the white robes of recent Santería initiates (iyawó), the eight dancers move in a slow, graceful circle to the rhythm of the goddess Yemayá, ‘… ase su Yemayá, Yemayá olodo, olodo Yemayá …’ The akpón’s phrase is repeated in soothing tones by the dancers.

The rhythms gradually build tension and the phrases of the call and response songs become shorter and more energetic: ‘… tsikini … a la modanse …’ The dancers have broken from the circle and are stepping quickly now, the largest batá drum (iyá) filling the electrified evening air with torrid, thunderous improvisations. One of the dancers near the front of the stage starts to convulse, eyes rolled back, taken by the goddess Yemayá. The other dancers catch her before she falls; she regains balance and starts to spin faster and faster: ‘… yaale yaalu ma o …’ The three batá drums are locked into a controlled, very rapid polyrhythm, punctuated by the calls of the iyá and responses of the second drum, itótele. The spinning dancer collapses and hits the floor.

The show is over and the audience is on its feet applauding. The lights come up and the air gradually fills with the sound of European conversations: ‘Where can I get a recording of this music?’ ‘Grabaste esa última parte con la cámara?’ ‘A quelle heure vient l’autobus de l’hôtel?’ Slowly the crowd disperses, most of it getting onto the tour bus. ‘The energy was incredible! What beautiful costumes …’

Personal Diary, Santiago de Cuba 2002

Theatrical renderings of sacred ritual are commonplace wherever there are hotels and cabarets in Cuba, and many foreigners (myself included) invest energy, money and time in learning this kind of religious music and dance. But according to the artistic director of the Cuban National Folklore Ensemble, Rogelio Martínez Furé, the material performed and the knowledge taught are often something other than they appear:

There are people who hardly know how to sing or play, yet they give music and dance classes to foreigners. And what they transmit is a popularised pseudo-tradition that is deformed and deforms … The temptation to earn easy money has captured many opportunistic hearts … since the good grain is mixed in with the dirt, they take advantage of the historical moment to prey on traditional culture for personal gain.

Martínez Furé’s point is not that the folkloric representation of sacred practices does them harm, but rather that the misrepresentation of religious traditions by untrained performers for unknowing audiences and students ultimately deforms their integrity:
Unfortunately, most of these young performers know very little about these traditions because they’re more focused on earning money. I call this ‘the jineterismo [hustling/pimping] of pseudo-culture.’ We have a serious problem here with the commercialisation of music and religion. Foreigners come to buy religious knowledge and experience, and many babalawos [priests of Ifá, a divination tradition associated with Santería] will do anything for dollars. For Martínez Furé, the integrity of Afro-Cuban religions has been eroded with commodification. It is an opinion shared by Miguel Barnet, who notes that the traditional practice of handing down sacred knowledge within religious families has been undermined by a new tendency to reveal secret information to paying customers. He calls this the ‘horizontalisation’ of what was previously a more structured, linear process of religious education. The changing material conditions brought by an opening economic climate, it seems, are causing cultural transformations.

GRASSROOTS RESISTANCE: THE TRANSCENDENCE OF TRADITION

It has been a busy weekend in the temple-house. There were over thirty people involved in the ceremonies last night, and many of the guests were still here this morning. After lunch seven batá drummers came to the temple-house and we prepared the drums for tonight’s ceremony. More drummers gradually arrived, and by 4pm there were eighteen omo aña [initiated drummers] chatting in the street outside the temple-house. That’s when Lázaro showed up. He said his group was hired for the night to play in the rooftop bar of the Hotel Inglaterra. He needed six drummers and could pay each of them fifteen US dollars. [About four times what a drummer typically earns in a religious ceremony.] Since only four of five drummers are needed to alternate on the three batá drums, I expected that Lázaro would take at least six of the eighteen drummers with him. But only one went. I asked some of the others why they didn’t take the opportunity. One of them replied: ‘We need money to survive, but we need el santo [‘the saint’, used here to mean ‘religion’] even more’.

Personal Diary, Havana 2001

The decisions of religious drummers to accept or reject these kinds of commercial opportunities usually involve more than a utilitarian calculation of profits. Such decisions are also based on community loyalties, fear of rebuke from religious elders, and a sense that the public performance of religious music is simply disrespectful to Santería’s spiritual foundations. These concerns can and do lead some musicians and dancers to restrict their performances to sacred contexts.

This is particularly true for members of two Havana grassroots Santería organisations called Ifá Iranlowo and Ilé Tún Tún. Both groups were founded in the early 1990s and share the goal of rediscovering and maintaining a more orthodox, less commercial Santería. They are leading an emerging ‘Africanisation’ movement within the religion, which Víctor Betancourt — the president of Ifá Iranlowo — describes as ‘the restructuring of the Afro-Cuban belief system, the rescue of ancient traditions and cultural roots deformed by syncretism’.

The two organisations demonstrated the depth of their public support during
the Pope’s visit to Cuba in 1998, when they convened over 450 high-ranking practitioners of Santería to lay the preliminary foundations of a unified Church of Santería. According to Anet del Rey Roa of Havana’s Centre for Psychological and Social Research (CIPS), the two organisations’ popular backing results primarily from their thorough research of Santería orthodoxy (largely through review of ethnographic data and interviews with religious elders), and their reserved stance toward folkloric performance of religious traditions. Together with the drummers in the diary excerpt, Ifá Iranlowo and Ilé Tún Tún demonstrate that some practitioners of Santería recognise conflicts between the expanding entertainment industry and the interests of their communities. These conflicts lead many people to subordinate commercial opportunities to religious loyalties.

HIDDEN EXCHANGES: THE TRANSCULTURATION OF TRADITION

The above scenarios represent diverging responses to an expanding tourist market, which Cuban scholars and religious practitioners have described as cultural transformation on the one hand and cultural resilience on the other. But there exists a wide margin of possibility between the extremes of religious survival versus religious breakdown, and it is in this margin that the mutual influences of tourism and Santería – their transculturations – are most visible. As my teacher Miguel shows in the following narratives, these spaces of interactive mutation are often elusive and hidden from the eyes of actors:

When a film crew arrives from England, Italy, Spain, the US etc, to film the music and dancing of rumba and batá, religion always figures in prominently. Today, the English film crew made Miguel the feature of their documentary. He did an interview in full ceremonial regalia plus a mock consultation with Orula [the Santería deity of divination]. After his performance I asked Miguel what other babalawos might say if they saw the film, which involved killing a pigeon for Orula.

‘Don’t worry, it’s all an act!’ he said. ‘I mean, look: this is what I used for Changó [the deity of thunder and drumming].’ He was pointing to a conga drum, over which he’d draped a red cloth, to make it appear as though the container of Changó would appear in a real ceremony. ‘And look,’ he went on, ‘is that Orula?’ He was talking about the collection of small seashells held in his palm. Although there were sixteen of them, these were not the cowry shells of Orula. ‘Also, I didn’t say the real words. Look ‘Omi ani wana … Carlos Manuel y su Clan … afri añeñe … Los Van Van, Isaac Delgado’ [names of Cuban pop music groups]. Any babalawo who sees this on TV will laugh and say, ‘Oh, that Miguel is a cabrón!’ And besides, anyone would do the same for $200 US.’

I’ve never heard Miguel justify his actions in such depth, particularly to me, so I was surprised he went into so much detail. And then I realised that there were others in the room, including another babalawo and two elderly priests of Santería. I think the energetic explanation was more for them.

Personal Diary, Havana 2001

In this episode Miguel made much of his skilful construction of an apparently authentic experience out of invented words, objects, and actions, and he identified this accomplishment as the cunning behaviour of a cabrón. But
babalawos have been strategically guarding sacred information since long before the recent wave of international attention on Cuba. A lack of appreciation for this tradition of selective restraint, particularly if one is attempting to learn information deemed sacred, can be dangerous. The story of Otura Niko, one of the many deified characters who comprises the parables of Ifá divination, expresses this lesson well. The day I was sworn to the batá drums, the story was narrated to me by a babalawo in the city of Santiago de Cuba as follows:

Otura Niko was learning to play the batá drums. He was improving well; so well that his teacher knew that Otura Niko would soon be more proficient than him. One day Otura Niko asked his teacher to give him the final secret rhythm, but his teacher refused. Otura Niko asked again and again until his teacher finally relented, saying, ‘Come to my house for dinner tonight and I’ll teach you the final lesson’. That night the two sat down to dinner; but only the teacher got back up. He had poisoned and killed his student Otura Niko for trying so hard to take knowledge that can only be given.

As my own proficiency on the batá drums improved, my various mentors and their colleagues made sure I knew this story well. On one occasion, while attending a batá ceremony with a Cuban fellow student, we noticed a number of differences between the way Miguel was playing and the way he had taught us. When we asked him about this he admitted what we had suspected: not only had he taught us an altered version of the rhythm in our drum class, but he had no intention of teaching us the correct version. Then, to our surprise, he congratulated us for learning an important lesson: that experience is the best teacher.

According to Martínez Furé, the pedagogic technique of withholding and disguising sacred knowledge is characteristic of African-based religion in Cuba. Meaningful lessons are revealed little by little and sometimes not at all, requiring new initiates to learn actively and patiently over a period of time. Time, though, is one of the few things that most foreigners do not have in Cuba, and even the month-long tourist visa has recently become more difficult for North Americans and others to acquire. As a result, foreign students of Santería music and dance, even those who become initiated in the religion, study their material hard but often have no opportunity to test the worth of their knowledge. While Martínez Furé points out the dangers of learning ‘deformed’ knowledge from unqualified, inexperienced teachers, this second kind of misinformation — the intentional kind — can result from studying with highly experienced teachers.

CONCLUSION

With copies of their lessons recorded on minidisks and videocassettes, most foreigners return home from Cuba — like the British film crew — satisfied that they got what they came for. In this way, babalawos like Miguel serve the interests of foreign tourists while staying within the boundaries of their religious tradition, and successfully make a living in the process. This synthesis of diverse objectives in ritual performance is an example of transculturation in practice. Seen in this light, Miguel’s folkloric performances, and those of thousands of others throughout the island, cannot be
explained simply in terms of religious breakdown or religious continuity. Instead, they reveal cultural mutations of a new kind that play out according to overlapping local and global scripts. As Sahlins has argued, even the most extreme social adaptations can appear seamless when they make good cultural sense. And as Ortiz argued over 40 years ago, the maintenance of good cultural sense for all concerned is what characterises even the most extreme transculturations.

This article has attempted to answer an increasingly pertinent question: does the contemporary predicament of Cuban Santería indicate the transformation of religious culture under the influence of an expanding global entertainment industry, or the transcendence of religious culture as it resists commodification? The answer must surely lie between these two extremes, with self-proclaimed écabrones like Miguel and thousands like him, who manage to balance and integrate business with religion. These are the new agents of transculturation: they serve two masters, and in so doing are themselves served by both.

ENDNOTES


5 Leal, interviewed April 2002.

6 Martínez Furé, ‘Cubanía’, pp. 11–12.

7 Martínez Furé, interviewed May 2001.

8 Miguel Barnet, interviewed March 2002.


11 Anet del Rey Roa, interviewed May, 2002.


The enormous development that over more than five centuries has achieved the technologies of land, sea and air transport, together with parallel developments in the field of communications, has facilitated a complex process of cultural exchanges that resolves itself in the concept of transculturation, so widely employed by the Social Sciences and Humanities in Cuba. This process has not only made possible the generalisation of hegemonic cultures, often shielded in acts of conquest and neo-colonial or class-based domination, but it has at the same time helped promote the movements of peoples, habits, customs and beliefs from the economically — and politically — dominated countries to the dominant or at least geographically-distanced centres.

Cuba is one example in which insularity allowed a defined individualisation within the Caribbean and Latin American ambit in which she finds herself geographically situated. The first three decades of the twentieth century served as an efficient catalyst to the process of strengthening her cultural identity, stemming from what she inherited from her own history, social reality and a fruitful exchange with the outside world.

Many factors have made possible the cultural definition and recognition of Cuba within the international community. This strategic Caribbean island has not only been the recipient of valuable cultural elements imported from other latitudes, as has the whole of Latin America, but it has also formed part of inverse currents taking place for well over five centuries.

THE ARUACO FACTOR

It is well known that the scarce and culturally rudimentary pre-hispanic population of the Cuban archipelago was left virtually extinct by the violent impact of conquest and cross-breeding. Neither in Cuba, nor in the rest of the Antilles, exist indigenous communities, such as those found in other parts of the American
continent. Nonetheless, some cultural elements of our ancient population of Aruaco origin have remained fixed in permanent ways in our islands and islets and, at least one of these, managed to transcend with uncommon force its own borders.

Despite the settlements and community-building efforts of the Catholic Church in colonial times, despite the implantations of new names during the period of the Republic, and more especially, despite the changes to the nomenclature based on the names of fallen combatants in the period of the Revolution, the identification of many key places in Cuba rests on an ancient terminology of Aruaco origin, as do also the local zoology and botany. In this way, Habana, Camaguey, Jatibonico, Bayamo, Baracoa, Guaniguanico, Hanabana, and hundreds of other names embellish with their lyricism the national territory. So do plants such as the corojo, majagua, caoba, yagruma, to name but a few. Animals of different species such as the caimán, almiquí, macabi, guanabá and bibijagua, today retain unaltered their original names.

But the most transcendental element of cubania of Aruaco origins has been sent to all corners of the world since the seventeenth century, as a form of response by the god of Cohoba or Cohiba to the conquest and colonisation of the islands. The material vehicle of this response has traditionally served to stimulate the relaxation of tensions of daily life and to liberate creative thought in some, as well as to impact dangerously on the health of others. I refer here to the tabaco and particularly to the manufactured product known as the habano. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the inhabitants of Cuba devoted themselves to planting this leaf in the outskirts of the cities and in the margins of the rivers, thus contributing to the European peopling of the Cuban countryside. Despite this, however, we are neither altogether responsible for the enormous diffusion of its consumption today, nor its principal beneficiaries.

THE DEFINITION OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS SINCE THE ADVENT OF SUGAR

Throughout the whole nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Cuban society and culture developed under the decisive influence of the sugar crop which, until 1886, had rested on the exploitation of slave labour. Tied to the growth of its production was the stabilising of Spanish immigration and the emergence of the forced migration of Africans, who brought with them not only their skin colour and their labour but also beliefs, customs, rituals and music from diverse origins. The Yoruba, Abakua, Arara y Carbalí, all contributed their respective cultures as well as received customs and traditions that had already undergone transculturation in the island.

Overlaying such a varied social and cultural base, the economy of the island, dependent on overseas markets, had given rise to a group of coastal cities which served as centres not only for overseas manufactured goods, but for travellers and publications conveying foreign ideas, customs and beliefs. Arising from these influences and in creative union with the domestic reality, certain basic profiles of Cuban society and culture began to take shape through these centuries. Gifted with great vital force, during the colonial era this insular community attempted at all times to develop its political and economic interests in
parallel with those which the Spanish metropolis tried to impose by force through its bureaucratic decisions and military control. Due to this permanent contradiction, during the nineteenth century and especially in its second half, separatist ideas achieved great prominence in the Cuban national conscience as a special element of the political culture of the nation.

The neo-colonial option enforced from the time of the US intervention in the War of Independence placed the country on the republican course in 1902, without having first achieved full national self-determination. With Cuba assigned a role complementary to the North American economy as provider of raw sugar, the sugar harvest continued to grow across the island during the first 25 years of the twentieth century, while, at the same time the immigration of labourers, then from the nearby Antilles, picked up in earnest, and the influence of the new metropolis increased throughout capital investments, the control of the domestic market and political pressures over matters internal to the recently founded Republic. In contradiction, there developed over these fragile foundations a most complete maturing of a defined cultural profile of the national character. Here the syncretic and mestizo elements inherent in the ethnic crucible in which Cuban nationality had been forged blended with the most diverse ideas of the critical situation of a society suffering under formally acknowledged external domination. Such reality was captured by the sensitivity of thinkers and artists, as well as by wider sectors of the population. In the cultural expression of the most enlightened exponents of the new era, the cubano blossomed as a manifestation of itself and its distinctiveness; in other cases, it emerged as conscious social critique and, among the most advanced intellectuals and leaders, as an aspiration of changes that might liberate Cuban society from the obstacles imposed on it by neo-colonialism.

ALMOST EVERYTHING CAME WITH THE ADVENT OF SUGAR

Even though Cuba came to the twentieth century already free from Spanish colonial domination, it remained chained to the political and economic interests of a country more powerful and close: the United States of North America. Since then, there came a change in the intensity and orientation of the Cuban historical process whose basic characteristics were in general terms: an accelerated rise in the production of sugar, the dependency on a buyer’s market and at the same time basic provider, the penetration of foreign capital, and the political domination of a new metropolis, different from the previous one, not only in those areas related to economic development and political orientation, but also in cultural and social terms.

The War of Independence, concluded in 1898, took a heavy toll on the population of the island, with almost 300,000 casualties of the reported dead and a decrease in the population by almost two-thirds. The repressive measures of the Spanish military command, and the North American naval blockade at the end of the war, not only decimated the population but also dislocated it, uprooting it from its original places of settlement. The Cuban population at that point was composed of 67.9 per cent whites of Spanish origin, 32.1 per cent blacks and mestizos, composed of Afri-
cans and their descendants, and 9 per cent foreigners, mainly Spaniards.\(^3\)

Cuban agriculture too arrived at the twentieth-century bearing the scars of the war. An unequal territorial and demographic distribution lent economic advantage to the eastern region in respect of the ancient provinces of Camaguey and Oriente. Some coastal cities, among them the capital of the country, were the dominant economic and political backbone as well as exercising cultural leadership; these were the cities of sugar and commerce. Other centres of particular significance were the capital cities of the provinces which, like Pinar del Rio and Santa Clara, were anchored to agricultural zones linked with the harvest of tobacco and other crops, while Camaguey represented the then debilitated cattle economy of the country.

Transport inside the island developed with the advent of the train in 1837 as a key component of the sugar expansion of the nineteenth century; far from helping to unify the internal market it brought together several regional circles linked to the ports which dealt directly with the international markets. These circumstances contributed to the differentiation between the eastern and western regions of the island, and to maintaining their lack of communication by land. Whatever small exchanges had existed between the regions had taken place until then almost exclusively through the navigation of coastal traffic.

Based on different premises and mercantile deals with the US, Cuban sugar production grew substantially and achieved an accelerated rate during the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century. This allowed the principal industry not only to recover, within a space of only three years, and to achieve pre-war levels, but to multiply five-fold its volume in little more than two decades, which meant a percentage of productive growth of about 20 per cent annually. Tied to the sugar expansion, the public and private railways also grew, extending to the point of reaching land communication across the whole of the national territory. New ports and maritime terminals were created and adapted to modern requirements and to the volume of manipulated merchandise, especially in the case of the provinces of Camaguey and Oriente. But this unforeseen growth brought with it profound deformities. The most significant of these was the reconstitution of the *latifundia* (large land ownerships). The old farmyards and possessions given as land grants by the Cuban town councils since the sixteenth century had been left demolished almost in their entirety at the start of the twentieth century, even though a few but extensive lands had remained in the form of undivided properties, precisely in those areas not yet penetrated by sugar plantation.

The expansive process of the principal industry also brought changes to the national composition of the population. The migratory flow of the old metropolis was raised so as to later incorporate the importation of labourers of other languages and idiosyncrasies originating from the different islands of the Antilles.

Even though during the first decade of the century the needs of sugarcane agriculture were able to be met with *macheteros* (machete workers) and unskilled workmen from the eastern region of the island, later expansion of the sugarcane crop to the provinces of Camaguey and Oriente required an increase in the labour force to a measure beyond that available in the country. This situation
favoured a migration current which, as much from Spain and from The Antilles, remained in place until after 1925.4

PAUSES IN THE MODERNISATION OF CUBAN SOCIETY

As a result of the sugar expansion, the proletarian masses achieved large numbers and superior maturity, in the senses both of organisation and ideology, especially during and after the First World War and the emergence of the first socialist state, and this despite the weight of negative factors such as the promotion of the pluri-national migration and the rise of different forms of class repression applied by successive republican governments.

This process of a class development was the direct result of the extension and consolidation of capitalist relations in Cuba within the existing system of domination. As a result of this, and in the same sense as in the previous century, the different sectors of the bourgeoisie established in the Great Antilles were also able to reach new stages in their particular development as a class and to realise some of their aspirations, especially those relating to the broadening of the margin of economic and social benefits designed to satisfy their material and spiritual needs, and in so doing achieve a superior quality of life based on social privilege, comparable to the status of the European and North American bourgeoisie of their time. An example of this can be seen through the urban heritage of La Habana and other cities in the interior of the country, and the existence of valuable collections of universal art put together largely by the domestic bourgeoisie throughout a period of some two centuries and which can be currently found in the National Museum located in the capital of Cuba.

In general terms, the demands of a growing population stimulated both the mercantile enterprises as well as the service industries, thus favouring the broadening of job opportunities for the middle classes and the professional sector, as well as increasing their influence within the framework of the neo-colonial society. These sectors not only grew in numbers, but their cultured expression was able to reflect objectively the social, cultural and political anxieties of the population as a whole.

Despite the economic bonanza, the social inequalities served to produce a polarisation of ideological positions in Cuban society. In it, the deep divisions of class as well as the foreign domination and political corruption were profiled as a triad of permanent misfortunes continually battering the country. To it was added the venality of the governors and the North American intervention in Cuba’s internal affairs.5

The growth in the production and export of sugar brought with it the transformation of the agro-industrial and mercantile training of the island. The founding and remodelling of the sugar centrales took place at a prodigious rate under the auspices of electrification. The process did not signify at the time the total eradication of the use of steam, but rather the incorporation of a more modern motorised force in the centrales. At the start, the electric plants were meant to give light and energy to certain steps of the industrial process; later this meant the total electrification of the production process.

The rhythms of rural life were imposed upon by the devastating presence of the sugar industry. Compared with
the miserly earnings of the tobacco and small fruit areas, or with the primitive levels of life imposed on a peasantry marginalised to zones of refuge in swamps and mountains, the sugar plantations and processing centres could be considered splendid and civilised places. But what kind of civilisation was imposed by the exploitation of sugar by the gran central? In the agro-industrial installations founded with the advent of sugar, society was rigidly stratified. Each sector, each social level occupied not only a socially recognised place, but also one physically delineated within the geography of the great plantation and its corresponding urban centre or batey.6

In the sugar batey, the Cuban government exercised no jurisdiction whatever until the 1940s. A private police was in charge of maintaining order. Nonetheless, class-based repression in times of social crisis remained always under the control of the National Army, during the direct action of the cavalry corps known as the Rural Guard. The sugar complex composed a factory of several floors, the complicated patio railway and the storage systems, the loading and unloading of the primary railway and of the finished product. Three other important elements completed the basic services at the installation: the grocery or mixed store of the ingenio, the expression of the commercial monopoly exercised by the owners; the chapel, and also the club, almost always for exclusive use. Next to the elevated chimneys of the central could be found the sumptuous palace of the owners. Such was the architectural and technological setting that would make the installations of the colonial batey pale into significance.

To the installation and broadening of new railways destined for public and industrial use was added the construction of new exporting centres, such as Antilla, and the harbour of Nipe, and Pastelillo and Puerto Tarafa in Nuevitas, in addition to an indeterminate number of private ports operated by the sugar companies. New populations such as Florida, Moron, Ciego de Avila and Jatibonico emerged or grew rapidly as a result of the sugar expansion and the transport railways, while the old colonial ports were dredged and their storage and capacities increased.

The modernisation that took place with such impressive speed in the sugar industry also reached, though with some delay, the urban areas. Some cities were given adequate equipment and infrastructure such as electric public systems in place of gas, the construction of sewage systems, all linked to the services of electric trams. Nonetheless, most of the most important towns in the island continued to retain their semblance of colonial times. In this way, La Habana (Havana) was able to exhibit some relevant innovations which captured its somewhat provincial character within the cosmopolitan framework. In La Habana urban development took place especially in the years of the First World War, when the last large tracts of the wall that had enclosed the historic part of the city were brought down, and concluded during the decade of the 1920s and the first critical years of the 1930s. It is to this period that we can date the modernisation of the avenues and parks of the capital city, when the littoral zones were filled in, and the streets of La Habana were paved in response to the sudden increase in automobile traffic. Following the electric tram came the mass importation of cars and trucks which, coming from the North American car industry,
began to take over the streets, particularly in the capital city of the Republic. But the most significant aspect of material progress became apparent through the extension of the limits of the capital city towards the neighbouring municipality of Marianao, old site of hostels and summer homes. In it were formed new residential areas with elegant homes, and based on official plans, other zones were assigned for the construction of houses for the labourers. In this last context, the plans were intended to raise the value of land through the urbanisation of peripheral spaces.

In La Habana as well as in provincial areas were built palaces for the accommodation of clubs and recreational societies of the highest exclusivity. With the creation of these institutions came the new bosses who would dictate the limits of recreational activity and the customs of the comfortable classes, making these the norm of the European-inspired aristocratic forms that had prevailed amongst the members of the bourgeoisie of Hispanic origin, and of forms of conduct apparently more democratic, but fiercely exclusivist, which had been assimilated through the contact ever more intense with North American society of these times.

The consumer power of the comfortable classes in Cuban society allowed the diffusion of patterns representative of the universal culture, especially amongst these sectors and the middle classes in the population, in terms of consumption and enjoyment, not only of material goods of the foreign industry, but also of the polished cultural products originating from Europe and the US. The offer of the cultural product was generally guaranteed by the European theatre and opera companies, concert players of fame, as well as the cinematographic enterprises, European and North American. The great artists of the time and also those with wide popularity, came to the Cuban stages leaving behind stimulating exemplars of professionalism as a contribution to the development of the national art.7

A GREAT LEAP IN CULTURAL EXPRESSION

The national reality in which Cuba found herself in the first three decades of the twentieth century was the result of a process generated by the joint actions of the government of the US, the North American monopolistic companies and their inevitable national allies. Such a reality was caught and reflected by the cultured expression of the country, with an objective image of it forming in the works of its creators. It was precisely since the decade of the 1920s, when a representative sector of the domestic capital, known as the Hispanic-Cuban bourgeoisie, was frustrated in its intentions to achieve a dominant influence over the national economy and politics. At that point the open or covert submission of the Cuban administrations to the interests of the US became more than apparent, as virtually the only guarantee of their stability, a matter recognised by the mass of the people as a fragile experience to which was joined the intervention by North American governments in the internal affairs of the country as common political practices in relation to Cuba.

It was precisely since the worsening of conditions of the Cuban reality, defined in terms of foreign domination, social injustice, corruption and employment repeated from the repression, that there began with greater force, higher
degree of maturity and coherence, both the sociological thought as well as the work of the most distinguished artists and intellectuals of Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century. The attempts to reclaim the most enlightened of Cuban thought of the previous century were followed by a conscious effort to give that thought continuity and to adapt it to the specific circumstances of each moment. To the tendency often adopted by the intellectuals and artists since the start of the nineteenth century, in terms of promoting the incorporation of modern universal currents of thought and its forms of expression in the area of artistic endeavour as a rejection of the schemes and values bequeathed to the colony, there followed the most diverse efforts to achieve an identification of the cultural components of 'the Cuban', and its creative integration with the purpose of achieving the establishment and interpretation of the most genuine roots of the national identity.8

In the first years of the Republic, the basic components of cubania, that is, the Spanish and the African, had been valued separately. Reinforced by a massive immigration of people from the peninsulas, Spanish influence remained anchored to the economic power available to the citizens of the Mother Country since the previous century, as well as by their own institutions, media outlets, the Catholic clergy and an important part of the private educational centres. These factors allowed the maintenance of the values and forms of Iberian culture with singular validity, while the traditional exchange with other values and forms born or assimilated with the sociocultural Cuban experience intensified.

The African component of the national culture had until then been held as a foreign body by the middle classes and the bourgeoisie in society. To the slave origins, the religiosity and the diverse customs, were added as negative element the colour of the skin and, above all, the lack of economic power. All this placed the black population of Cuba during those years, under the banner of discrimination. Religious beliefs as well as dietary habits, customs, music and other basic manifestations of the Afrocuban, were typically considered under the simple denomination of 'the things of the Blacks', and some of its practices were placed at the level of a marginality tinged with crime. It is thus not strange that in 1912 some sectors of the Black population should opt to begin the struggle for their civil rights through their incorporation in an armed movement that would come to be known as Movimiento de los Independientes de Color — the Movement of the Independents of Colour. With the most fierce repression there followed a prohibition for more than 25 years of all those public manifestations of the Black population, such as religious processions, dances, celebration of carnaval and others. As in the European Middle Ages, the accusations of witchcraft and the scandalous processes against the Blacks ensured the completion of the frame of discredit reserved for the Black population at the end of the second decade of the twentieth century.9

The search for and the defence of a cultural expression of its own which separated the Hispanic from the African components had led more than a few intellectuals and artists since the nineteenth century to opt for the identification of the genuinely Cuban in the indigenous roots, in the Aruaco, in the manner of the poet of that century, Juan Cristobal Napoles Fajardo, known as El

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Cucalambé. Others had opted for the most absolute rejection of the culture of Hispanic and African origins inherited from the colonial period, in order to formulate the assimilation of other patterns of European culture. There was also the tendency to join the more universal components of Western culture to the criollo tradition of the nineteenth century, such as was achieved to an extent by the composer Eduardo Sanchez de Fuentes. Nonetheless, in the most representative expressions of the plastic, the music and the literature of the decades of the 1920s and 1930s, there were finally expressed in all their richness the components of a culture inherited and decanted, which sank its various roots as much in the past as in the immediate present.

Founded at the University of Havana, the Academia de Bellas Artes of San Alejandro, or in the different academies, conservatoriums and public and private institutions across the island, the Cuban creators of the first three decades of the twentieth century relied on an educational base of considerable magnitude for their professional development. Inheritors of a tradition of cubania fed secularly by Hispanic and African components, and influenced by contemporary characteristics of the urban and rural habitats of the island, the national intellectuals and artists of that era were also fed by the European and American cultural life which had continued to feed the largest of the Antilles. Cuba, traversed by travellers, was a space open to the influence of personalities and currents which stood out in the art and the politics of that era.

Through the creative connections with overseas, the systematic study, or the lifestyles acquired through residence in the great leading cultural centres, the creators who animated cultural life in those decisive first decades of the twentieth century, received through various channels the sap of the new conceptions and ideas of how to reflect, interpret and transform the reality of life then. This era proved decisive in the maturing of a contemporary Cuban culture. Its legacy was an unrepeatable but coherent grouping of realisations which established the fundamental guidelines for the future development of an expression of what was the national Cuban, and marked it through a language in tune with the times.

THE REFLECTION OF SOCIAL LIFE IN THE CREATORS

From the very moment of the First North American intervention in the island, the romantic verse of the poets of the first republican generation, such as that of Bonifacio Byrne, became a tool for patriotic celebration, at the same time that the re-emergence of the modernist theme became a negative critique of colonial values in the works of poets such as Regino Boti and Jose M. Poveda. Soaked in cubania, the poetry of Agustin Acosta became a vehicle of anguish, nonconformity and pessimism before a reality apparently impossible of being transformed by the aspirations for social justice and self-determination of the Cuban people.10

It was precisely the critique of the prevailing conditions that became the centre around which resolved other manifestations of the national culture in the first years of the Republic. In a manner similar to the essay of social and political criticism, the novel of the first quarter of the Republic century became a testimony of potent realism which re-
flected the raw realities of the period. The novels of the journalist Jesus Castellanos, as well as those from the labour leader and later academic Carlos Loveira; those of the medical doctor Miguel de Carrion, together with the writings of the sociologist José Antonio Ramos, brought to the understanding of the contemporary reality a great deal more than the apologetic rhetoric or demagogic opposition of the politicians in their speeches and declarations directed to an electorate anxious for change.

The pace of the publications, newspapers and journals rose considerably. From this period dates the foundation (1916) of a frivolous journal, which originated from a transcendent vehicle of cultural propagation. The journal Social had a great deal to do with the bourgeois way of life, but it also served to promote national as well as universal cultural values. Other publications, such as the journal Cuba Contemporánea (1913) created space for analyses and opinions of contemporary issues of the most diverse tendencies, with a high level of specialisation.

Almost at the conclusion of the decade of the 1920s emerged the Revista de Avance (1927). Much influenced by the Spanish Revista de Occidente, this organ of cultural diffusion insisted throughout its brief existence of three years, in the realisation of Cuban thought and of ideas relating to the aesthetic renewal. Mouthpiece of avant-garde thought, Revista de Avance marked an exceptional moment in the history of Cuban culture, characterised by the affirmation of the ability of intellectuals to seek solution to the problems of the country through the efforts of a small group of cultured men and women.11 With the end of this publication in 1930 was buried the idealist vision of social progress. Henceforth, this vision was overridden by the reality of the mass struggle against the tyranny of General Gerardo Machado and the neo-colonial system of domination prevailing in the country.

Nonetheless the surge experienced by the organs of cultural diffusion, the profound differences existing in Cuban society, together with the level of illiteracy among the labouring and peasant masses, as well as the incommunication of vast rural zones, meant that wide sectors of society were denied access, not only to the culture, but also to schooling. According to the 1931 census, only 36.5 per cent of the population between the ages of 5 and 9 were able to attend school regularly.12

While it is true that during the second Republic government (1909–1913) there was an attempt to institutionalise the activities of the intellectuals through the creation of official entities, such as the Academia Nacional de Artes y Letras and the Academia de la Historia, while the Museo Nacional also began its precarious existence,13 the decade of the 1920s witnessed a proliferation of private institutions, independent groups and organs of diffusion that emerged as a result of the spontaneous movement of intellectuals and artists who had reached a superior level of maturity and national consciousness. In this context, it is worth mentioning the Sociedad del Folklore Cubano (1923) and the Institución Hispano-Cubana de Cultura (1926) promoted under the direction of the distinguished sociologist and historian Fernando Ortiz. Nonetheless, the supreme manifestation of the work of intellectuals and artists of the decade of the 1920s crystallised in a movement lacking in institutional organisation but bursting with dynamism.
and involvement in the cultural and political life of the country. Born of a combative nucleus of writers who had led a political protest in the ambit of culture in the year 1923, the Grupo Minorista presented a new attitude on the part of artists and intellectuals who openly expressed their discontent with the republican blemish and, in particular, in respect to the administrative corruption of the government of President Alfredo Zayas. In its endeavours were concretised as one the love of culture and of revolutionary action. Its program introduced a volume of positions relating to the crisis of Cuban society, while at the same striking against false cultural values, eventually orienting itself towards the search for new perspectives. The minoristas spoke against the distancing of intellectuals from the national political life, urging these to assume positions more actively engaged with the future of the nation.14

THE CUBAN IN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

The most distinguished painters of the colonial period, Leopoldo Romanach and Armando G. Menocal, undertook from the beginning of the Republic a search for the Cuban through different means; the first, through the landscape and the image centred on the human figure, generally expressive of a kind of social dramatism. In Menocal the epic theme of the War of Independence, of which he was a protagonist, was present particularly in his officially commissioned works. In both cases, we are dealing with pillars of Cuban painting of the first two decades of the century which at the same time were bearers of an academic enterprise of high order, but which did not reach the impressionist forms of the end of the nineteenth century.

Influenced by the same social and cultural circumstances which generated the intellectual works, painting changed considerably its orientation in the decade of the 1920s, attempting to press the Cuban theme and the use of an expression based on avant-garde currents and techniques making their way through Europe and America. Cubism, expressionism, bearers of urban and rural themes while based on Cuban types and personages, began to enrich the national art through the palette and the elegant drawings of Victor Manuel Garcia, or the slippery transparency of Carlos Enriquez. Daily life as a theme was advanced by the fine drawing of Aristides Fernandez, while the cubism of Amelia Pelaez would enter the interior of colonial patios to assume a new plastic dimension. They all gave a new sense to Cuban painting of the 1920s, defining its future orientation. Cuban contemporary painters are the direct descendants of the renewed labour which began to manifest itself in the decade of the 1920s; it is there that resides its coherence as a pictorial movement.

But it was in music where the earliest and most spontaneous expressions of the Spanish and the African were integrated and expressed with greatest force. Perhaps the fact that traditionally the musicians originated from the sector ‘of colour’ in Cuban society helped to favour the free interpretation of European canonical music, through versions whose rhythm, sensuality and percussion instruments went to play a fundamental role in musical expression. It is precisely music that is the main and perhaps the most popular cultural expression of the Cuban. An example of this is the emergence of the danzón in 1877, which,
stemming from the widely developed *contradanza* of the nineteenth century, began during the Republic a nationally-accepted dance among all social classes. It would not be until the 1920s when, from the eastern-most province, was introduced in the west of Cuba the dancing song popularly known as *Son*; and which until recent times has enjoyed great popularity across the country as well as overseas.\(^{15}\) It is in this same way that Cuban musical formulas — old and *marineras* — have been reflected internationally, as in the case of *la habanera*, and *la guarachera*, at present well received, especially through the very popular *Guantanamera*. The *sones*, *guarachas*, *mambos* and the *salsa* are no longer merely part of Cubans’ national heritage but of the wider community in which we live.

A more complex spring in musical creation had as its base the theatre. Originating from a very strong vernacular tradition in Cuban stage, the musical theatre maintained its relevance in the first 30 years of the century, from the theatre ‘Alhambra’, a burlesque habanero which combined the picaresque with the political critique and the music. Nonetheless, it was not until the end of the decades of the 1920s and beginnings of the 1930s when the genre was able to surpass the ambit of the theatre ‘only for men’, with the incorporation of young musical figures that would one day become emblematic such as Ernesto Lecuona, Gonzalo Roig and, later, Rodrigo Prats, who allowed it to escape its narrow margins. The shallow political critique was thus overcome through works of a higher order which claimed the Spanish *zarzuela* through themes, characters and music truly Cuban. With the launching of ‘Niña Rita’ in 1927, Ernesto Lecuona achieved a milestone in Cuban lyrical theatre,\(^{16}\) with other emblematic works of musical theatre following, such as *María la O*, *Cecilia Valdés*, or *El Cafetal*. Thus, in the scheme of these works, the *mulata de rumbo* became the most relevant character in the island’s musical theatre.

With the inauguration of the Republic on 20 May 1902, music had once again entered the course of popular culture, through the performance of concert bands created under the patronage of military regiments and the municipal councils. The colonial urban tradition of the *retreta* was reclaimed to become a fitting medium for the promotion of music written by the great universally acclaimed composers, amongst the population of the cities and towns. In the case of La Habana, this work was performed by musicians of high reputation and talent, such as Guillermo Tomas and Gonzalo Roig. This activity contributed to the cultivation of musical sensitivity amongst the popular classes. Also, among the elite sectors of the capital there emerged an interest in the promotion of this elevated artistic manifestation. The founding of the Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical in 1916 established an important premise for the later development of concert music in Cuba.

With the aim of promoting symphonic music, two important orchestral institutions were created in the decade of the 1920s in La Habana. In 1922, by the initiative of Gonzalo Roig and with the support of the eminent Iberian cellist Pablo Casals, was founded the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional. Two years later, the exclusive Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical signed up the Spanish musician Pedro Sanjuan to found the Orquesta Filarmónica de La Habana. These devel-
opments worked to promote music in Cuba, by introducing a modern orientation and by promoting contemporary musicians little known in the island, such as Manuel de Falla, Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy. The introduction of elements of modernity in the music also helped to facilitate access and assimilation of the tambores and Afrocuban rhythms into symphonic music, and which came to be considered as a representative expression of Cuban symphonic music.

The new musical conceptions emerged most clearly through the work of creators such as Amadeo Roldán and Alejandro García Caturla, who marked the start of modern symphonic Cuban art. With the Obertura sobre temas cubanos, premiered in 1925, Roldán marked a crucial moment in Cuban music, while talent and formal diversity began to show themselves in Caturla, with Tres danzas cubanas and Rumba (1927), Canto guajiro (1928), and Dos poemas sinfónicos and Bembé (1929).

A FEW BRIEF IDEAS IN CONCLUSION

The simultaneous rejection of the colonial legacy and the manifestations of Africanness kept the cultivated expression of Cuban artists and intellectuals away from essential forms and contents until almost the decade of the 1930s, with the almost exclusive exception of popular music. Nonetheless, during the second decade of the century, the negative impact of the imperialist domination on the country had already been felt. It was from this point that a reaction took force among the diverse sectors of the population, which tended towards the rescue and defence of the proper interests and values of the Nation, while at the same time emphasising the lack of perspectives for a practical solution to the fundamental problems of Cuban reality within the limits of the system of domination imposed on the country. Problems such as large land ownership and uncontrolled immigration were subjected to the critical judgement of distinguished intellectuals, whilst the North American control over the economy of the island, the discrimination and the cultural penetration, generated negative assessments on the part of those leading most of the national sectors. The critical reflection over such a state of affairs meant that ultimately there arose in the bosom of Cuban society an anti-imperialist current of considerable proportions.

Together with their people, the creators forged during the Republic began to express their ideas of rejection to the reality that they had lived, using for their ends both the essay of economic, social and political critique, as well as the language of poetry and the literature of fiction based on the great social realism. In spheres more independent and distant from the social reality, as music and the plastic arts are usually thought to be, this reality also found its appropriate reflection. The cubano began to be expressed with authenticity, mastery and critical sense, thus setting the foundations for future creation.

At the start of the decade of the 1930s, the neocolonial option imposed on Cuba by North America had been achieved in its totality, but at the same time the symptoms of crisis of a system of domination had also been identified and registered, considerably aggravated by the crisis of world capitalism since 1929. Already by then had been set down the most legitimate values of the national
culture as the identification of its links with the most universal expressions of the contemporary. The opposition and the rejection of the neocolonial options were the unequivocal symptoms of the degree of consciousness which the Cuban creators and the artists had achieved before the tragic reality which urgently demanded to be transformed.

As much for the maturity and the representativeness of the work achieved, as for the participation in the social life through the groups and organs of dissemination formed by them, the intellectuals and artists of the first 30 years of republican life created the necessary conditions to award successive generations of the most valuable elements of the national tradition, and at the same time communicate to them their modernising urges. The development achieved by Cuban culture to this day owes a special debt to the generations of artists and intellectuals who, during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, gave a significant impulse to the formation of the precious cultural heritage which the Revolution received in January 1959, and which in some form has been carried by the strong emigration which since that date has taken place from the largest island of the Antilles.

ENDNOTES

1 This novel concept was introduced by the famous Cuban sociologist and historián Don Fernando Ortiz, in order to establish the idea of reciprocal action in cultural exchanges, thus challenging the idea of uni-directional flow attributed to the processes of cultural domination.

2 See Mapa Geotopográfico de Cuba by Esteban Pichardo (1859) and Atlas Nacional de Cuba, (1970); also the Diccionario Geográfico, Histórico y Estadístico de la Isla de Cuba by Jacobo de la Pezuela, and Cuba en la Mano, encyclopaedic work about Cuba (La Habana: 1940).


5 In this sense can be mentioned the US Second Intervention between 1906 and 1909 and the landing of marines in 1912 and 1917. To this can be added the interference of the US President’s special agent in Cuba between 1919 and 1923, and the so-called ‘mediation’ of 1933.

6 Batey is the indigenous term used in Cuba to describe a small settlement, although it is generally used to mean a group of installations, households and spaces surrounding a sugar factory or central. Instituto de Historia de Cuba, La Neocolonia: Reorganización y Crisis, (La Habana: Editora Política, 1998) pp. 136–138; and A. García Alvarez, De la Consolidación a la Crisis, (La Habana: Editorial Felix Varela, 2001) pp. 85–86 and 98–105.


13 In Havana, there existed, since the first half of the nineteenth century, a science museum under the auspices of the *Academia de Ciencias Físicas y Matemáticas*. Between 1899 and 1900, were founded through private patronage, the museums ‘Emilio Bacardi’ in Santiago de Cuba and the ‘Oscar M. de Rojas’ in Cardenas.


El enorme desarrollo que durante más de cinco siglos ha tenido la tecnología de los transportes terrestre, marítimo y aéreo, unido al paralelo desarrollo de las comunicaciones, han favorecido un complejo proceso de intercambios culturales que se resumen en el concepto de transculturación, tan utilizado por las Ciencias Sociales y Humanísticas en Cuba. Dicho proceso no solo ha facilitado la generalización de las culturas hegemónicas muchas veces amparado en acciones de conquista y de dominación neocolonial o clasista, sino que al mismo tiempo ha favorecido la traslación de personas, usos, costumbres y creencias desde los países dominados económicamente y políticamente hacia los centros dominadores o, simplemente, distanciados geográficamente.

Cuba constituye un caso en el cual la insularidad ha permitido una definida individualización dentro del ámbito caribeño, latinoamericano, en que está geográficamente insertada. Las primeras tres décadas del siglo XX sirvieron como un eficiente catalizador para el proceso de fortalecimiento de su identidad cultural, a partir de lo heredado de su propia historia, de su realidad social y de un fructífero intercambio con el exterior.

Variados han sido los factores que han propiciado la definición y el reconocimiento cultural de Cuba en el ámbito internacional. La estratégica isla caribeña ha sido, como también lo ha sido la totalidad de la América Latina, una receptora de valiosos componentes culturales importados desde otras latitudes, pero también ha formado parte de la corriente inversa que ha tenido lugar durante más de cinco siglos.

EL COMPONENTE ARUACO

Es conocido que la escasa y culturalmente rudimentaria población prehispánica del archipiélago cubano quedó prácticamente extinguida a causa del violento impacto de la conquista y el mestizaje. Ni en Cuba, ni en el resto de las Antillas quedan comunidades indígenas, tal y como existen en otros lugares del continente americano. Sin embargo, algunos elementos culturales de nuestra antigua población de origen...
aruaco han quedado fijados de manera permanente en nuestras islas e islotes y, al menos uno de ellos trascendió con descomunal fuerza hacia el exterior.

A pesar de los bautizos y fundaciones poblacionales realizados con el apoyo del santoral católico durante los siglos coloniales; a pesar de las implantaciones de nuevos nombres durante la República y, muy especialmente, a pesar de los cambios realizados en la toponimia a partir de los nombres de combatientes caídos en combate en época de la Revolución, la identificación de muchos de los principales lugares de Cuba descansa en una antigua terminología de origen aruaco, como también lo hacen la zoonimia y la fitonimia locales.2 En este sentido, Habana, Camagüey, Jatibonico, Bayamo, Baracoa, Guaniguanico, Hanábana, y cientos de otros nombres adornan con su soberanía el territorio nacional. Plantas como el corojo, majagua, caoba, yagruma, son solo pequeños ejemplos. Animales de especies distintas como el caimán, almiquí, macabí, guanabá o bibijagua, hoy mantienen inalterables sus nombres.

Pero el más trascendental componente de cubanía de procedencia aruaca ha sido enviado a todos los rincones del mundo desde el siglo XVII, como una especie de respuesta del dios de la Cohoba o Cohiba a la conquista y colonización de las islas. El portador material de dicha respuesta ha servido tradicionalmente para estimular el relajamiento de tensiones en la vida cotidiana y liberar el pensamiento creador en las personas; pero también ha podido afectar peligrosamente la salud de otros. Me refiero al tabaco y particularmente al producto manufacturado conocido como habano. Durante los siglos XVII y XVIII los habitantes de Cuba se dedicaron preferentemente al cultivo de esta hoja en los alrededores de las ciudades y en las márgenes de los ríos, contribuyendo al poblamiento europeo del campo cubano. Sin embargo, de la enorme difusión de su consumo en el día de hoy no somos enteramente responsables, así como tampoco sus principales beneficiarios.

LA DEFINICIÓN DE COMPONENTES CULTURALES A PARTIR DEL AZÚCAR

Durante la totalidad de los siglos XIX y XX, la sociedad y la cultura cubanas se desarrollaron bajo el influjo decisivo de la plantación azucarera que hasta 1886 había descansado en la explotación del trabajo esclavo. Unido al crecimiento de tal producción, se estabilizó la inmigración española y se potenció la inmigración forzada de africanos, los cuales incorporaron, además del color de su piel y su trabajo, sus creencias, costumbres, rituales y música de diversas procedencias. Lo yoruba, abakuá, arará y carabali, incorporaron sus respectivas culturas al tiempo que recibieron los aportes de la ya transculturadas costumbres y tradiciones de Cuba.

Sobre tan variada base social y cultural, la economía de la isla, dependiente de los mercados exteriores, había dado vida a un grupo de ciudades portuarias que sirvieron como centros receptores no sólo de las manufacturas extranjeras, sino también de viajeros y publicaciones comunicadoras de ideas, costumbres y creencias foráneas. A partir de las influencias recibidas y en unión creadora con la realidad interna, llegaron a conformarse los perfiles fundamentales de la sociedad y la cultura cubanas a lo largo de estos siglos. Dotada de una gran potencialidad vital, durante la etapa colonial la sociedad insular intentó en todo
momento desarrollar sus propios intereses políticos y económicos paralelamente a los que la metrópolis española trató de hacer prevalecer por la fuerza de las decisiones burocráticas y el control militar. A causa de esta permanente contradicción, durante el siglo XIX y especialmente durante su segunda mitad, las ideas separatistas lograron ocupar un espacio importante en la conciencia nacional cubana como un componente esencial de la cultura política de la Nación.

La opción neocolonial instrumentada a partir de la intervención de los EE.UU. en la Guerra de Independencia colocó al país en el cauce de la vida republicana en 1902, sin haber alcanzado antes la plena autodeterminación nacional. Asignada a Cuba una función complementaria en la economía norteamericana como abastecedora de azúcar crudo, la plantación azucarera continuó extendiéndose por la isla durante los primeros veinticinco años del siglo XX, a la vez que la inmigración de braceros, entonces desde las cercanas Antillas, cobró nuevos bríos, al tiempo que se incrementaba la influencia de la nueva metrópolis a través de inversiones de capital, el dominio del mercado interior y la presión política sobre los asuntos internos de la recién creada República. Contradictoriamente, sobre estas frágiles bases se llevó a cabo la más completa maduración de un definido perfil cultural de carácter nacional. En el mismo se mezclaron los componentes sincréticos y mestizos propios del crisol étnico en que se había formado la nacionalidad cubana, con las ideas más diversas sobre la crítica situación de una sociedad que estaba padeciendo la dominación extranjera de un modo formalmente encubierto. Dicha realidad fue captada por la sensibilidad de pensadores, estudiosos y artistas, así como también por amplios sectores de la población. En la expresión cultural de los más esclarecidos exponentes de la nueva época, lo cubano afloró como una manifestación de lo propio y lo diferente; en otros casos surgió como crítica social consciente y, entre los más avanzados intelectuales y líderes, como aspiración a cambios que pudieran liberar a la sociedad cubana de las trabas impuestas por el neocolonialismo.

CASI TODO SE HIZO A PARTIR DEL AZÚCAR

Aunque Cuba arribó al siglo XX libre del dominio colonial español, ésta quedó subordinada a los intereses políticos y económicos de una nación más poderosa y cercana: los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica. A partir de entonces se operó un cambio en la intensidad y orientación del proceso histórico cubano cuyas características básicas fueron en términos generales: el acelerado ascenso de la producción azucarera, la dependencia de un mercado comprador y a la vez abastecedor fundamental, la penetración de capitales foráneos, y la dominación política de una nueva metrópolis diferenciada de la anterior, no solo en aquellos aspectos relacionados con el desarrollo económico y la orientación política, sino también en los órdenes cultural y social.

La Guerra de Independencia terminada en 1898 dejó un saldo negativo en la población de la isla. Ésta había sido afectada en casi 300 000 almas, entre las muertes reportadas y la reducción de la tasa de natalidad en casi dos terceras partes. Las medidas represivas del mando militar español y el bloqueo naval norteamericano al finalizar la Guerra, no solo diezmaron la población sino que también la dislocaron, desarraigándola
de sus lugares de asentamiento original. La población cubana en aquel momento estaba integrada por un 67.9% de blancos de origen español, un 32.1% de negros y mestizos constituido por africanos y sus descendientes, a la vez que un 9% del total era reconocido como extranjero, principalmente españoles.\(^3\)

También la agricultura cubana arribó al nuevo siglo con las afectaciones producidas por la Guerra. Una desigual distribución territorial y demográfica daba un peso económico superior a la región occidental con respecto a las antiguas provincias de Camagüey y Oriente. Un grupo de ciudades costeras entre las que se incluía la capital del país constituía el polo dominante de la economía y la política, a la vez que ejercía una suerte de liderazgo cultural; eran las ciudades del azúcar y el comercio. Otras poblaciones de singular importancia eran las capitales de provincia, que como Pinar del Río y Santa Clara, estaban enclaveadas en zonas agrícolas vinculadas a las cosechas del tabaco y otros frutos, mientras que Camagüey representaba la entonces muy debilitada economía ganadera del País.

El transporte interior de la isla, desarrollado con el ferrocarril a partir de 1837 como un componente indispensable para la expansión azucarera del siglo XIX, lejos de haber servido a la unificación del mercado interno había logrado formar un conjunto de circuitos regionales vinculados a los puertos que comunicaban directamente con los mercados internacionales. Dicha realidad contribuyó a la diferenciación entre las regiones del Este y el Oeste de la isla, y a mantener su incomunicación por vía terrestre. El escaso intercambio entre ambas regiones se había realizado hasta entonces casi exclusivamente mediante la navegación de cabotaje.

Basado en diferentes premisas y compromisos mercantiles con EE.UU., la producción azucarera cubana resultó muy estimulada y logró crecer a un ritmo acelerado durante los primeros veinticinco años del siglo XX. Esto permitió en solo tres años la recuperación de la principal industria hasta alcanzar los niveles anteriores a la Guerra, y la quintuplicación de dichos volúmenes en algo más de dos décadas, lo que significó una tasa media de crecimiento productivo de alrededor del 20% anual. Unido a la expansión azucarera, también los ferrocarriles de servicio público y privado crecieron y se extendieron hasta lograr la comunicación terrestre de todo el territorio nacional. Nuevos puertos y terminales marítimas se crearon y adaptaron a los requerimientos modernos y a los volúmenes mercantiles manipulados, especialmente en los casos de las provincias de Camagüey y de Oriente. Pero este insustituto crecimiento estuvo acompañado de profundas deformaciones. La más significativa de ellas fue la reconstitución del latifundio. Los antiguos corrales y hatos otorgados como mercedes de tierras por los cabildos cubanos desde el siglo XVI habían quedado demolidos casi en su totalidad al comenzar el siglo XX, aunque todavía permanecieron en forma de propiedades pro-indivisas unos pocos pero extensos fundos y también algunas tierras realengas, precisamente en aquellos lugares donde la plantación azucarera no había penetrado todavía.

El proceso expansivo de la principal industria trajo también modificaciones en la composición nacional de la población. El flujo migratorio de la antigua metrópolis se incrementó para incorporar posteriormente la importación de braceros de otros idiomas e idiosincrasia pro-
cedentes de las diferentes islas de Las Antillas.

Aunque durante la primera década del siglo las necesidades de la agricultura cañera pudieron solventarse con macheteros y peones procedentes de la zona occidental de la isla, la posterior expansión de los cultivos cañeros hacia las provincias de Camagüey y Oriente demandó el concurso de fuerza laboral en cantidades superiores a la disponible en el país. Esta situación resultó favorable a la corriente inmigratoria que tanto desde España como desde Las Antillas se mantuvo vigente hasta después de 1925.4

PAUTAS MODERNIZADORAS EN LA SOCIEDAD CUBANA.

Como resultado de la expansión azucarera, las masas proletarias alcanzaron un gran incremento numérico y una superior madurez, tanto de orden organizativo como ideológico, especialmente durante y con posterioridad a la Primera Guerra Mundial y al surgimiento del primer estado socialista, y no obstante el peso de otros factores desfavorables, como lo fueron el fomento de la inmigración golondrina plurinacional y el incremento de distintas formas de represión clasista aplicadas por los sucesivos gobiernos republicanos.

Dicho proceso de desarrollo clasista fue el resultado directo de la extensión y profundización de las relaciones capitalistas en Cuba en el marco del sistema de dominación vigente. Como resultado de esto, y al igual que en el anterior siglo, los distintos sectores de la burguesía asentados en La Gran Antilla también estuvieron en condiciones de alcanzar nuevas etapas de su particular realización como clase y materializar algunas aspiraciones, especialmente las relacio-
transformación del equipamiento agro-industrial y mercantil de la isla. La fundación y remodelación de los centrales azucareros se verificó a un ritmo vertiginoso bajo el signo de la electrificación. El proceso no significó en aquel momento la erradicación total del empleo del vapor, sino la incorporación de una fuerza motriz más moderna en los centrales. En un inicio, la planta eléctrica estuvo destinada a dar alumbrado y energía a algunos pasos del proceso industrial; posteriormente esto significó la electrificación total del proceso productivo.

Las normas de la vida rural fueron impuestas por la avasalladora acción de la industria azucarera. Comparado con el misero remanso de paz que eran las zonas tabacaleras y de frutos menores, o con los niveles de vida primitivos que se imponían al campesinado marginado en las zonas de refugio de pantanos y montañas, la plantación cañera y los centrales podían considerarse como lugares esplendorosos y civilizados. Pero ¿qué tipo de civilización fue la impuesta por la explotación azucarera del gran central?. En las instalaciones agroindustriales creadas a partir del azúcar, la sociedad estaba rígidamente estratificada. Cada sector, cada capa social ocupaba no solo un lugar socialmente reconocido, sino también físicamente delimitado en la geografía de la gran plantación y su correspondiente centro urbano o batey. En el batey azucarero el estado cubano no ejerció jurisdicción alguna hasta los años cuarenta del siglo XX. Una policía privada se encargaba del orden cotidiano. Sin embargo, la represión clásista en los momentos de agitación social debía quedar siempre a cargo del Ejército Nacional mediante la acción directa del cuerpo de caballería montada conocido como Guardia Rural. El pueblo azucarero agrupaba en su seno una fábrica de varios pisos, el complicado patio ferroviario y los sistemas de almacenaje, carga y descarga de la materia prima y el producto terminado. Otros tres elementos importantes completaban los servicios básicos de la instalación: la bodega o tienda mixta del ingenio, expresión del monopolio comercial ejercido por la empresa propietaria; la capilla, y también el club casi siempre de uso exclusivo. Próximo a las elevadas chimeneas del central se encontraba el suntuoso palacete de los propietarios. Así se completaba un conjunto arquitectónico y tecnológico que haría parecer modestas las instalaciones del batey colonial y bucólica su actividad.

A la ampliación e instalación de nuevos ferrocarriles destinados tanto al uso público como al industrial, se unió la construcción de nuevos puertos exportadores, como Antilla, en la bahía de Nipe, y Pastelillo y Puerto Tarafa en Nuevitas, además de un número indeterminado de puertos privados que operaban las empresas azucareras. Nuevas poblaciones como Florida, Morón, Ciego de Avila y Jatibonico surgieron o crecieron rápidamente como resultado de la expansión del azúcar y los transportes ferroviarios, mientras que los viejos puertos coloniales eran dragados e incrementaban sus capacidades de almacenaje y atraque.

La modernización que tuvo lugar con impresionante celeridad en la industria azucarera, también alcanzó, aunque con cierto retraso, las zonas urbanas. Varias ciudades fueron dotadas de equipamiento e infraestructura adecuada, tales como los servicios de alumbrado eléctrico público en sustitución del gas, la construcción de alcantarillado y acueductos, a todo lo cual se unió el servicio de los tranvías eléctricos. Sin embargo, la
mayoría de las poblaciones más importantes de la isla continuaron mostrando parecida imagen a la que habían ofrecido en los tiempos coloniales. En este sentido, La Habana sí pudo exhibir algunas innovaciones de relevancia que trocaron su aspecto un tanto provinciano en el de una gran urbe cosmopolita. En ella el desarrollo urbano se materializó sobre todo a partir de los años de la Primera Guerra Mundial, cuando se destruyeron los últimos grandes tramos de la muralla que había encerrado el recinto histórico de la ciudad, y que concluía durante la década de los veinte y los críticos años iniciales de la de los treinta. De aquellos tiempos data la modernización de las avenidas y parques capitalinos; se rellenaron varias zonas del litoral, y se pavimentaron las calles de La Habana como una respuesta al inusitado incremento del tráfico automotor. Al tranvía eléctrico siguió la importación masiva de automóviles y camiones que, procedentes de la industria automotriz norteamericana, comenzaron a inundar las calles, sobre todo en la capital de la República. Pero la más significativa noción del progreso material se hizo patente mediante la extensión de los límites de la capital hacia el vecino municipio de Marianao, antiguo lugar de estancias y de veraneo. En él se fomentaron nuevos barrios residenciales con suntuosas edificaciones y también se parcelaron otras zonas para la construcción de casas destinadas a obreros sobre la base de planes oficiales. En este último caso se trató generalmente de planes destinados a la revalorización de terrenos mediante la urbanización de espacios periféricos.

Tanto en La Habana como en las urbes provinciales fueron edificados palacetes destinados al alojamiento de clubes y sociedades de recreo de la mayor exclusividad. A partir de estas instituciones se fueron asimilando los nuevos patrones que regirían la actividad recreativa y las costumbres de las clases acomodadas, haciéndolas transitar desde las formas aristocráticas de inspiración europea que habían prevalecido entre los miembros de la burguesía de origen hispano, hasta la adopción de normas de conducta de apariencia más democráticas, pero ferozmente exclusivistas, que habían sido asimiladas por el contacto cada vez más intenso con la sociedad norteamericana de la época.

La capacidad adquisitiva de los sectores acomodados de la sociedad cubana permitió la difusión de los patrones representativos de la cultura universal, especialmente entre dichos sectores y las capas medias de la población, a partir del consumo y disfrute, no solo de artículos y bienes materiales de la industria extranjera, sino también de un producto cultural muy acabado que regularmente provenía de Europa o EE.UU.. La oferta del producto cultural quedó generalmente garantizada por las compañías europeas de teatro y ópera, concertistas de fama, así como por las empresas cinematográficas tanto europeas como norteamericanas. Los grandes artistas de la época y también los de mayor popularidad, pasaron por los escenarios cubanos dejando su estimulante ejemplo de profesionalismo como contribución para el desarrollo del arte nacional.8

UN GRAN SALTO EN LA EXPRESIÓN CULTURAL

La realidad nacional en que Cuba se debate durante las tres primeras décadas del siglo XX fue el resultado de un proceso activado por la acción conjunta del gobierno de los EE.UU., las empresas
monopolistas norteamericanas y sus inevitables aliados nacionales. Dicha realidad fue captada y reflejada por la expresión culta del país, llegándose a conformar una imagen objetiva de la misma en la obra de los creadores. Fue precisamente a partir de la década del veinte, cuando un sector representativo del capital doméstico, el conocido como burguesía hispano-cubana, vio frustradas sus aspiraciones de lograr una influencia determinante sobre la economía y la política nacionales. En aquel momento se hizo más que evidente el sometimiento abierto o disimulado de las administraciones cubanas a los intereses de los EE.UU., como casi única garantía para la estabilidad de las mismas, cuestión que era reconocida por la generalidad del pueblo como una deleznable experiencia a la cual quedaron unidos la injerencia en los asuntos internos del país y la intervención, como prácticas políticas habituales de los gobiernos norteamericanos con relación a Cuba.

Fue precisamente a partir del agravamiento de las condiciones propias de la realidad cubana, definidas en términos de dominación extranjera, injusticia social, corrupción y empleo reiterado de la represión, cuando comenzaron a manifestarse con mayor fuerza, superior grado de madurez y coherencia, tanto el pensamiento sociológico como la obra de los artistas e intelectuales más destacados de Cuba en la primera mitad del siglo XX. Los esfuerzos por retomar el pensamiento cubano más esclarecido del anterior siglo fueron seguidos de un propósito consciente por dar continuidad al mismo y adaptarlo a las circunstancias específicas de cada momento. A la tendencia adoptada con frecuencia por intelectuales y artistas desde los inicios del siglo XIX, en cuanto a estimular la incorporación de las modernas corrientes universales de pensamiento y sus formas de expresión en el ámbito de la creación artística como un rechazo a los esquemas y valores heredados de la colonia, le siguieron los más variados esfuerzos por lograr la identificación de los componentes culturales de "lo cubano", y su integración creadora con el objetivo de lograr el establecimiento e interpretación de las más genuinas raíces de la identidad nacional.

En los primeros años de la República, los componentes básicos de la cubanía; es decir, lo español y lo africano, habían sido valorados por separado. Reforzada por una inmigración masiva de peninsulares, la influencia española quedó apuntalada por el poder económico de que habían dispuesto los ciudadanos de la Madre Patria desde el siglo anterior, y también por sus propias instituciones, órganos de prensa, el clero católico y una parte importante de los centros educacionales privados. Estos factores permitieron el mantenimiento de los valores y formas de la cultura ibérica con singular vigencia, mientras que se intensificaba el ya tradicional intercambio con otros valores y formas surgidos o asimilados a partir de la experiencia sociocultural cubana.

El componente africano de la cultura nacional había sido visto hasta entonces por los sectores medios y burgueses de la sociedad como un cuerpo extraño. Al origen esclavo, la religiosidad y costumbres diferenciadas, se añadieron como elementos negativos el color de la piel y, sobre todo, la carencia de poder económico. Todo ello colocó a la población negra de Cuba en aquellos años, bajo el signo de la discriminación. Tanto las creencias religiosas como los hábitos alimentarios, costumbres, música y otras
manifestaciones propias del etnos afro-cubano, fueron usualmente considerados bajo la simple denominación de cosa de negros, y algunas de sus prácticas colocadas en el plano de la marginalidad rayanas con el delito. Por ello no resulta extraño que en 1912 algunos grupos de la población negra optaran por iniciar la lucha por sus derechos civiles mediante su incorporación a un movimiento armado que se conocería como Movimiento de los Independientes de Color. A la represión más feroz siguió la prohibición por más de 25 años de todas aquellas manifestaciones públicas de la población negra, tales como procesiones religiosas, comparsas, celebración del carnaval y otras. Como en la Edad Media europea, las acusaciones de brujería y los procesos escandalosos contra los negros se encargaron de completar el cuadro de descrédito reservado a la población negra, al terminar la segunda década del siglo XX.10

La búsqueda y defensa de una expresión cultural propia haciendo abstracción de los componentes hispano y africano había conducido desde el siglo XIX a no pocos intelectuales y artistas a optar por la identificación de lo genuinamente cubano en las raíces indígenas, en lo aruaco, al modo que lo había realizado en aquel siglo el poeta Juan Cristóbal Nápoles Fajardo, conocido como El Cucalambé. Otros habían optado por la vía del rechazo más absoluto a la cultura de origen hispano y africano heredada de la época colonial, para plantearse la asimilación de otros patrones culturales europeos. También existió la tendencia de fundir los componentes de la cultura occidental más universal con la tradición criolla del siglo XIX, tal y como en alguna medida lo lograra el músico Eduardo Sánchez de Fuentes. Sin embargo, en las más representativas expresiones de la plástica, la música y la literatura de las décadas de los veinte y treinta, quedaron finalmente expresados con toda su riqueza los componentes de una cultura heredada y decantada, que hundía sus dispersas raíces tanto en el pasado como en el presente mismo.

Formados en la Universidad de la Habana, la Academia de Bellas Artes de San Alejandro, o en las distintas academias, conservatorios e instituciones públicas y privadas de la isla, los creadores cubanos de las tres primeras décadas del siglo XX dispusieron de una base docente de cierta consideración para su formación profesional. Herederos de una tradición de cubanía alimentada secularmente por los componentes hispanos y africanos, e influenciados por las características contemporáneas de los habitats urbano y rural de la isla, los intelectuales y artistas nacionales de aquella época recibieron también el aliento que la vida cultural europea y americana habían continuado irradiando hacia La Mayor de Las Antillas. Cuba, encrucijada de viajeros, fue un espacio abierto a la influencia de personalidades y corrientes que descollaban en el arte y la política de cada época.

Mediante el contacto creador con el extranjero, el estudio sistemático, o las vivencias adquiridas por la permanencia en los grandes centros culturales líderes, los creadores que animaron la vida cultural en aquellas decisivas décadas iniciales del siglo XX, recibieron por distintas vías la savia de las nuevas concepciones e ideas del cómo reflejar, interpretar y transformar la realidad en que se vivía. Dicha época resultó decisiva para la maduración de la cultura cubana contemporánea. Ella dejó como saldo un irrepetible pero coherente conjunto de
realizaciones que estableció las pautas fundamentales para el posterior desarrollo de una expresión propia de lo nacional cubano, y lo dejó plasmado mediante un lenguaje a tono con los tiempos en que se vivía.

EL REFLEJO DE LA VIDA SOCIAL EN LOS CREADORES

Desde el momento mismo en que se inició la Primera Intervención norteamericana en la isla, el verso romántico de los poetas de la primera generación republicana, como el de Bonifacio Byrne, se trocó en vehículo de exaltación patriótica; al mismo tiempo, la reanudación de la línea modernista se erigió como negación crítica de los valores coloniales en poetas como Regino Botí y José M. Poveda. Transida de cubanía, la poesía de Agustín Acosta se convirtió en portadora de la angustia, inconformidad y pesimismo ante una realidad aparentemente imposible de ser transformada a favor de las ansias de justicia social y autodeterminación del pueblo cubano.11

Fue precisamente la crítica al estado de cosas prevaleciente, el centro alrededor del cual giraron algunas otras manifestaciones de la cultura nacional en los primeros años de la República. De manera similar al ensayo de crítica social y política, la novelística del primer cuarto de siglo republicano proporcionó un testimonio de gran realismo que reflejó las crudas realidades de la época. Las novelas del periodista Jesús Castellanos, así como las del dirigente obrero y más tarde académico Carlos Loveira; las del médico Miguel de Carrión, unidas a lo escrito por el sociólogo José Antonio Ramos, aportaron al conocimiento de la realidad contemporánea mucho más que el discurso apologético o la oposición demagógica de los políticos en sus discursos y declaraciones dirigidas a una clientela electoral ansiosa de cambios.

El ritmo de las publicaciones, diarios y revistas se incrementó considerablemente. De este período data la fundación (1916) de una revista frívola en su origen, que devino en trascendente vehículo de divulgación cultural. La revista Social tuvo mucho que ver con el modo de vida burgués, pero sirvió a la vez para dar a conocer los valores de la cultura tanto nacional como universal. Otras publicaciones como la revista Cuba Contemporánea (1913) dieron cabida a los análisis y opiniones de las más diversas tendencias sobre los problemas contemporáneos, con un superior nivel de especialización.

Casi al terminar la década de los veinte surgió la Revista de Avance (1927). Muy influenciada por la española Revista de Occidente, este órgano de difusión cultural insistió durante su corta existencia de tres años, en la actualización del pensamiento cubano y las ideas sobre la renovación estética. Vocero de un pensamiento de vanguardia, dicha publicación marcó un momento excepcional en la historia de la cultura cubana caracterizado por la sobrevaloración de la capacidad de los intelectuales para dar solución a los problemas del país mediante el esfuerzo de una minoría de hombres y mujeres cultos.12 Con el cese de esta publicación en 1930 quedó enterrada una visión idealista del progreso social. Posteriormente dicha visión quedó superada por una realidad en que se impuso la lucha de masas contra la tiranía ejercida por el general Gerardo Machado y el sistema de dominación neocolonial prevaleciente en el país.
No obstante el auge experimentado en los medios de difusión cultural, las profundas diferencias existentes en la sociedad cubana, unido al nivel de analfabetismo prevaleciente entre las masas de trabajadores y campesinos, así como la incomunicación de numerosas zonas rurales, motivaron que amplios sectores de la sociedad mantuvieran todavía privados del acceso, no solo a la cultura, sino también a la educación escolar. Según el censo de 1931, solo el 36,5% de la población de entre 5 y 9 años de edad podía asistir regularmente a la escuela.\textsuperscript{13}

Si bien es cierto que durante el segundo gobierno republicano (1909-1913) se trató de institucionalizar la actividad de los intelectuales mediante la creación de entidades oficiales como la Academia Nacional de Artes y Letras y la Academia de la Historia, al tiempo que iniciaba su precaria existencia el Museo Nacional,\textsuperscript{14} la década de los veinte contempló la proliferación de instituciones privadas, agrupaciones y órganos de difusión independientes, surgidos como resultado de un movimiento espontáneo de intelectuales y artistas que habían alcanzado un grado superior de madurez y conciencia nacional. En este sentido cabe mencionar la Sociedad del Folklore Cubano (1923) y la Institución Hispano-Cubana de Cultura (1926), fomentadas bajo la dirección del destacado sociólogo e historiador Fernando Ortiz. Sin embargo, la manifestación suprema de la labor de los intelectuales y artistas de la década de los veinte se concretó en un movimiento carente de organicidad institucional, pero rebosante de dinamismo y participación en la vida cultural y política del país. Surgido a partir de un combativo núcleo de escritores que había protagonizado una protesta política en el ámbito cultural en el año de 1923, el ‘Grupo Minorista’ planteó una actitud nueva por parte de los artistas e intelectuales que expresaba abiertamente su inconformidad con las laceras republicanas y, en especial, con respecto a la corrupción administrativa del gobierno del presidente Alfredo Zayas. En su quehacer quedaron plasmados al unísono el amor a la cultura y la acción revolucionaria. Su programa introdujo una toma de posiciones con respecto a la crisis de la sociedad cubana al mismo tiempo que arremetió contra los falsos valores culturales, para finalmente orientarse hacia la búsqueda de nuevas perspectivas para la creación. Los ‘minoristas’ se manifestaron contra el alejamiento de los intelectuales de la vida política nacional, abogando por que los mismos asumieran posturas más comprometidas con el porvenir de la Patria.\textsuperscript{15}

LO CUBANO EN LAS MANIFESTACIONES ARTÍSTICAS.

Los más destacados pintores formados en la etapa colonial, Leopoldo Romáñach y Armando G. Menocal, asumieron desde el inicio de la República una búsqueda de lo cubano mediante vías distintas; el primero mediante el paisaje y la escena centrada en la figura humana, generalmente expresiva de cierto dramatismo social. En Menocal el tema épico de la Guerra de Independencia, de la cual fue protagonista, estuvo presente especialmente en su obra por encargo oficial. En ambos casos se trata de los puntales de la pintura cubana de las dos primeras décadas del siglo que a la vez fueron portadores de un quehacer académico de gran oficio, el cual, sin embargo, no rebase la formas del impresionismo de fines del siglo XIX.\textsuperscript{16}
Influenciada por las mismas circunstancias sociales y culturales que accionaron sobre el conjunto de la creación intelectual, la pintura modificó sustancialmente su orientación en la década de los veinte, sobre la base de lograr el apresamiento del tema cubano y el empleo de una expresión fundamentada en las corrientes y técnicas de vanguardia que entonces se abrían paso en Europa y América. Cubismo, expresionismo, sustentadores de temas urbanos y rurales, pero basados en tipos y personajes cubanos, comenzaron a enriquecer la plástica nacional mediante la paleta y el dibujo elegante de Víctor Manuel García, o la transparencia escurridiza de Carlos Enríquez. El hecho cotidiano como tema fue ayudado por el fino dibujo de Arístides Fernández, mientras que el cubismo de Amelia Peláez entraba en los patios interiores coloniales para recibir una nueva dimensión plástica. Todos ellos dieron un original sentido a la pintura cubana de los años veinte, definiendo su orientación futura. Los pintores cubanos contemporáneos son continuadores directos de la obra renovada que comenzó a manifestarse en la década de los veinte; en ello radica su actual coherencia como movimiento pítico.

Pero fue en la música donde más temprana y espontáneamente se integran y expresaron con mayor fuerza los componentes de lo español y lo africano. Quizás el hecho de que tradicionalmente los músicos hubieran provenido del sector ‘de color’ de la sociedad cubana haya favorecido la libre interpretación de los cánones musicales europeos, mediante versiones en las que el ritmo, la sensualidad y los instrumentos de percusión pasaron a desempeñar un papel fundamental para la expresión musical. Es precisamente la música el componente mayor y quizás el más divulgado de la expresión cultural de lo cubano. Un ejemplo de ello es el surgimiento del danzón en 1877, a partir de la contradanza ampliamente cultivada en el siglo XIX, para convertirse durante la República en un baile de aceptación nacional entre todas las clases sociales. No sería hasta los años 20 en que, procedente de la provincia más oriental se introdujo en el occidente de Cuba la canción bailable conocida popularmente como Son; el cual hasta fechas todavía muy cercanas ha gozado de gran popularidad en todo el país y también en el extranjero.17 Es en esta misma dirección que se han proyectado internacionalmente fórmulas musicales cubanas, antiguas y marineras, como lo es el caso de la habanera, y la guajira, actualmente muy aceptada, especialmente en la muy divulgada Guantanamera. Sones, guarachas, mambo y la salsa, ya no son solo patrimonio de Cuba sino del ancho mundo en que vivimos.

Una más compleja vertiente de la creación musical tuvo como base el teatro. Proveniente de una tradición vernácula muy fuerte existente en la escena cubana, el teatro musical mantuvo su vigencia en los primeros treinta años del siglo, a partir del teatro ‘Alhambra’, burlesco habanero en el que se combinaban la picardía con la crítica política y la música. Sin embargo, no fue sino hasta finales de la década del veinte y principios de la del treinta cuando el género logró rebasar el ámbito del teatro ‘solo para hombres’, con la incorporación de jóvenes valores musicales que resultarían insignes como Ernesto Lecuona, Gonzalo Roig y, posteriormente Rodrigo Prats, quienes le hicieron salir de aquel estrecho marco de espectadores exclusivamente masculinos. El sainete de crítica costum-
brista y política resultó así superado por obras de mayor pretensión que retomaba la zarzuela española a partir de temas, personajes y música propiamente cubanos. Con el estreno de ‘Niña Rita’ en 1927, Ernesto Lecuona marcó un hito en el teatro lírico cubano, estrenándose posteriormente obras de teatro musical muy emblemáticas como lo son María la O, Cecilia Valdés, o El Cafetal. Así, en la trama de estas obras, la mulata de rumbo se convirtió en el personaje más relevante del teatro musical de la isla.

Con la inauguración de la República el 20 de mayo de 1902, la música había entrado de nuevo en los cauces de una divulgación popular, mediante la actuación de bandas de concierto que fueron creadas bajo el patrocinio de los regimientos militares y los ayuntamientos municipales. La urbana tradición colonial de la "retreta" se recuperó para convertirse en un medio idóneo para la difusión de la música escrita por los grandes autores universalmente reconocidos, entre la población de las ciudades y los pueblos. En el caso de La Habana, esta labor la desempeñaron músicos de gran arraigo y talento, como Guillermo Tomás y Gonzalo Roig. Dicha actividad contribuyó al cultivo de la sensibilidad musical entre las capas populares. También entre los sectores élites de la capital se materializó plenamente el interés por la divulgación de esta elevada manifestación artística. Con la fundación de la Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical en 1916, quedó establecida una premisa importante para el posterior desarrollo de la música de concierto en Cuba.

Dirigidas al propósito de difundir la música sinfónica se crearon en la década del 20 dos importantes instituciones orquestales en La Habana. En 1922, por iniciativa de Gonzalo Roig y con el apoyo del eminente cellista ibérico Pablo Casals, se creó la Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional. Dos años más tarde, la exclusiva Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical contrató al músico español Pedro Sanjuán para fundar la Orquesta Filarmónica de La Habana. Esta emulación redundó en beneficio de la música en Cuba, al introducirse una orientación moderna y ser divulgados músicos contemporáneos poco conocidos en la isla, como Manuel de Falla, Maurice Ravel y Claudio Debussy. La introducción de elementos de modernidad en la música también resultó stimulante para franquear el acceso y la asimilación de los tambores y ritmos afrocubanos por parte del ámbito musical sinfónico, que pasaron a ser considerados como una expresión representativa de la música sinfónica cubana.

Las nuevas concepciones musicales se manifestaron sobre todo mediante la obra de creadores como Amadeo Roldán y Alejandro García Caturla, quienes marcaron el inicio del moderno arte sinfónico cubano. Con la "Obertura sobre temas cubanos", estrenada en 1925, fijo Roldán una fecha capital en la música cubana, mientras que el talento y diversidad formal comenzaba a manifestarse en Caturla, con Tres danzas cubanas y Rumba (1927), Canto guajiro (1928), y Dos poemas sinfónicos y Bembé (1929).19

UNAS BREVES IDEAS COMO CONCLUSIÓN

El rechazo simultáneo de la herencia colonial y de las manifestaciones de africanía mantuvieron a la expresión culta de los artistas e intelectuales cubanos privada de formas y contenidos esenciales casi hasta la década de los treinta, con la excepción casi exclusiva de la música popular. Sin embargo, durante la se-
gunda década del siglo, ya se habían comprobado los efectos negativos que la dominación imperialista causaba al país. Fue a partir de entonces que se abrió paso con fuerza una reacción entre los diversos sectores de la población, que tendía al rescate y defensa de los intereses y valores propios de la Nación, al mismo tiempo que se ponía énfasis en de la falta de perspectivas para dar solución práctica a los problemas fundamentales de la realidad cubana dentro de los límites del sistema de dominación impuesto al país. Problemas como el latifundismo y la inmigración incontrolada fueron sometidos al juicio crítico de destacados intelectuales, mientras que el dominio norteamericano sobre la economía de la isla, la discriminación y la penetración cultural, generaban evaluaciones negativas por parte de dirigentes de casi todos los sectores nacionales. La reflexión crítica sobre dicho estado de cosas hizo que finalmente surgiera en el seno de la sociedad cubana una corriente antimperialista de considerables proporciones.

Junto a su pueblo, los creadores formados en la República comenzaron a expresar sus ideas de rechazo a la realidad en que habían vivido, utilizando para ello, tanto el ensayo de crítica económica, social y política, como el lenguaje de la poesía y la literatura de ficción basada en un gran realismo social. En esferas más independientes y distantes de la realidad social, como frecuentemente son consideradas la música y las artes plásticas, también dicha realidad tuvo un reflejo apropiado. Lo cubano comenzó a ser expresado con autenticidad, maestría y sentido crítico, dejando sentadas las bases para la creación futura.

Al iniciarse la década de los treinta, la opción neocolonial norteamericana impuesta a Cuba había quedado modelada en su totalidad, pero al mismo tiempo también se habían identificado y registrado los síntomas de crisis de un sistema de dominación, considerablemente agravado por la situación que atravesaba el capitalismo mundial desde 1929. Ya para entonces aparecieron planteados como cuestiones fundamentales, tanto la búsqueda de los valores más legítimos de la cultura nacional como la identificación de sus vínculos con las expresiones más universales de lo contemporáneo. La crítica y el rechazo a la opción neocolonial fueron los síntomas inequívocos del grado de conciencia que habían alcanzado los creadores y artistas cubanos ante una trágica realidad que reclamaba con urgencia su transformación.

Tanto por la madurez y representatividad de la obra realizada, como por la participación en la vida social mediante las agrupaciones y órganos de difusión formados por los mismos, los intelectuales y artistas de los primeros treinta años de vida republicana crearon las condiciones necesarias para dotar a las generaciones sucesivas de los más valiosos elementos de la tradición nacional y a la vez comunicarles sus alientos modernizadores. El desarrollo alcanzado por la cultura cubana hasta nuestros días tiene una especial deuda con las generaciones de artistas e intelectuales que, durante las décadas de los veinte y treinta del siglo XX, dieron un significativo impulso para la formación del valioso patrimonio cultural que recibiera la Revolución en enero de 1959, y el cual de algún modo ha llevado consigo la fuerte emigración que desde la década de los sesenta ha tenido lugar a partir de La Mayor de las Antillas.
ENDNOTES

1 Se trata de un concepto novedoso introducido por el notable sociólogo e historiador cubano Don Fernando Ortiz, para establecer la idea de una acción recíproca en el intercambio de las culturas, superando así la idea del flujo unidireccional atribuido a los procesos de dominación cultural.

2 Ver Mapa Geotopográfico de Cuba de Esteban Pichardo (1859) y Atlas Nacional de Cuba, (1970); además el Diccionario Geográfico, Histórico y Estadístico de la Isla de Cuba de Jacobo de la Pezuela, y Cuba en la Mano, obra enciclopedia sobre Cuba (La Habana: 1940).

3 Informe sobre el Censo de Cuba, 1899, (Washington: Imprenta del Gobierno, 1900) pp. 44–45 y 481–484.


5 En este sentido pueden mencionarse la Segunda Intervención norteamericana entre 1906 y 1909 y el desembarco de marines en 1912 y 1917. A ello se agregan la injerencia de un delegado especial del presidente norteamericano en Cuba, entre 1919 y 1923, y la llamada `mediación´ del año 1933.


14 En La Habana existía desde la segunda mitad del siglo XIX un museo de Ciencias auspiciado por la Academia de Ciencias Físicas y Matemáticas. Entre 1899 y 1900
se habían creado mediante el patrocinio privado, los museos ‘Emilio Bacardí’ de Santiago de Cuba y el ‘Oscar M. de Rojas’ de Cárdenas.


HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION IN THE AMERICAS:

WHAT CAN WE LEARN IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION?

JESSICA WYNDHAM

This conference on the 'Diaspora of the Latin American Imagination' provided an opportunity to explore certain facets of the American experience. I propose here, however, to take a step sideways and look at what we, in the Asia Pacific region, can learn from the American experience. I propose to address the human rights situation in the Americas and specifically the Inter-American Human Rights system. And I shall discuss in broad terms the model created in the Americas and whether such a model could similarly be established in this region.

The absence of an overarching regional human rights system in the Asia Pacific is important for the region and the international human rights community as it stands alone in the world as the only region that has not established such a system. In addition to the Americas, Europe and Africa have also established a system of human rights. It is the American experience — that is, the experience of the American continent — that is the point of comparison. I will highlight some ways in which this experience can inform our thoughts and debates on the issue of establishing such a system in this region. I intend to rebut some of the arguments often used to justify the position that our region should not or could never agree to the establishment of a system of human rights along the lines of the Inter-American Human Rights system. I will also outline some of the steps already made towards the creation of a regional mechanism.

THE AMERICAN REGIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM

The Inter-American political system and related human rights structures were the first of their type to be established in the world. American states held meetings on regional issues well before the Second World War. Following the defeat of the Axis Powers, the Americas, comparatively untouched by the human rights atrocities of Europe and the Pacific, were in a good position to respond with a united human rights position which might also act as a model for others. In early 1948 a group of states of the Americas established a regional organisation aimed at promoting peace and security: the Organisation of American States (OAS). The United Nations had been formed a couple of years before, in 1946. Europe followed closely behind the Americas with the establishment of the Council of Europe.
in 1949. The African Organisation of Unity was established in 1963. The OAS originally comprised 21 states including Argentina, Brazil, Cuba (which by resolution was excluded from participation in the OAS in 1962 and has yet to regain membership), Haiti, and the United States of America. In subsequent years all other American states joined the OAS. Canada, Belize and Guyana were the last states to become members in the early 1990s.

The American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, which sets out a comprehensive list of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and duties, was adopted during the same conference that established the OAS. The American Declaration was important not only regionally but also internationally as it preceded by a few months the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The latter must also have at least been in the minds of the drafters of that document which was to become the touchstone of all future human rights documents. The American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man was therefore the first overarching human rights document of its kind in any regional or international setting.

The American Declaration, not originally named in such a way that suggested any legally binding obligations on those states that signed it, in fact was held by the Inter-American Court and Commission to create obligations for the member states of the OAS.

Another important step in the protection of human rights in the region was taken in June 1960 with the establishment of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. This body was charged with promoting the observance and protection of human rights and was designed to serve as a consultative organ to the OAS. Despite the intention that the Commission act as a consultative body, it came to acquire wider powers. One significant example of the evolution of the Commission was the development of its power to hear individual petitions and to make recommendations to member states in response to these petitions. This change gave the Commission a quasi-legal function and relatively wide scope in which to exercise it.

The OAS was originally intended as a regional political body. Nonetheless, the combined effect of the American Declaration and Inter-American Commission was to create a limited range of human rights obligations which the members of the OAS were obliged to implement. Thus, the OAS in fact became a norm-setting and monitoring body that demanded certain human rights standards of its members.

The OAS took an important step towards entrenching regional human rights concerns in law with the adoption of the American Convention on Human Rights in November 1969. Until that date the members of the OAS were bound by regional human rights arrangements only to the extent that the Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man was considered to be legally binding on OAS members. In 1966, however, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations were adopted and opened for ratification. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which had been intended to represent the aspirational, if not legally binding, human rights standards of the United Nations members, thus led the way for two legally binding instruments. Similarly in the American context, after 1969, any member nation which ratified the Convention became strictly bound by
As far as I can see, people in El Salvador have an idyllic vision of Europe, the ancient Europe, the society of equality, where the welfare state makes it possible for everyone to live well. But the problem is the treatment that the people receive when they come here from third world countries, because Europe is Europe and there is a corporate spirit that protects it from all sides (Valentin).

The concept of European citizenship is currently being debated in Europe, and although several proposals date back to classical Greece — including slavery — the citizens who are committed to the defence of civil rights propose a civil European citizenship for all residents based on a consensus catalogue of rights and obligations. In the European representation of immigration there is a wide loss of memory between European history of emigration and the emergent discourse of closing frontiers: between 1820 and 1920, approximately 60 million Europeans emigrated to the so-called ‘New World’.

What does it mean to be Latin American in twenty-first century Europe, and particularly in Spain? How do they view themselves and the society that surrounds them, and the changes made in the recent years? What is their opinion about their position in Europe and the position of Europeans in the world? How has their vision of Spain and Europe changed before and after living here? How do they bear in mind their native countries so far away?

In the first part of the work, it is my voice as Spanish researcher and lawyer that speaks. In the second part are the Latin American voices that tell to me ‘stop talking on my behalf’, as Peter Read suggests in the prologue of Belonging. Luzmar, Rita, Valentin and Walter will answer to our request. Valentín was a member of the Education Department in El Salvador, came to Spain with a grant in 1995 and married here. Walter, a sociologist, came to Spain in 1978 after watching many of his friends die or go into exile during the dictatorship when he felt that there was no longer anything left for him in Argentina. Luzmar is a Colombian refugee. She has travelled a long way since she arrived in Spain in 1981 until her present job as an intercultural mediator in a social services centre. Rita, from Brazil, is an actress who has lived in Spain for ten years. She has been playing, for the last two years, the monologue The Bogus Woman by Kay
Ashead, the story of an asylum seeker in Europe.

Through their voices is constructed the voice of consciousness.

FOREIGNER, IMMIGRANT, CITIZEN

Europe is becoming a fortress. In an economically globalised world, the political systems that arose from nineteenth-century philosophy and society are being used by the elite to provide a veneer of democracy for the decisions that are made by power groups. An economist beyond reproach, such as Nobel prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz, senior vice-president of the World Bank, argues that the gap between the haves and the have-nots is wider than thirty years ago, and that decisions taken by the International Monetary Fund or G-7 favour the interests of oligarchies. The arguments of fear and terror are being used to justify the setbacks in democracy and respect for human rights. As John Pilger observes, ‘the attacks of September 11, 2001 did not “change everything” but accelerated the continuity of events, providing an extraordinary pretext of destroying social democracy’.

Many citizens who are aware of this situation feel powerless to react from inside or outside the system. There are many elements that uphold this situation: for example, loss of prestige of many traditional representative institutions like political parties or trade unions, the system’s ability to incorporate any critical approach promoted by NGOs (non-government organisations) or social movements, the fragmentation of reaction groups (ecologists, women, Sahara inhabitants etc.), the fear of Muslims or Arabs. The superimposition of these facts recalls the popular aphorism ‘Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me’. The most persecuted group in Europe today, the ‘other’ that they come to look for, is the immigrant.

Migration is a contemporary issue, although it has probably been one of the essential questions in mankind’s history. The Johannesburg Summit of August 2002 showed that 80 per cent of the world’s population suffers from hunger and that a billion people lack water. Rita’s voice is very clear.

We will discuss other things, but as long as there is poverty, if my neighbour has nothing and I show off my wealth, man, what can I expect my neighbour to do to me, if he has nothing, not even bread to feed his child, and I have everything? It is necessary to distribute, and if some countries possess a lot and others don’t have anything, then people will go where there is something because they refuse to die of hunger. I am reminded of a phrase that I heard in Brazil, some time ago, in the north-east. Why there is hunger? ‘There is hunger because of drought, because of nature, and because people shouldn’t live there.’ And a seven-year-old boy who watched his five-year-old brother die of hunger and malnutrition, asked his mother who was also in bad shape: ‘Mummy, will there be bread in heaven?’

Migratory movements respond to economic imbalance between regions or countries, sociological factors or ethnic, political or religious conflicts. It is evident that movement must inevitably exist nowadays, especially in a globalised world where it seems that distances have dissolved and images are consumed simultaneously everywhere. But contemporary globalisation contains the contradiction that free trade in capital,
goods, services and information does not mean free trade in people.

THE LEGAL APPROACH

Migrants are people that left their country to live or work temporarily in another one, therefore, out of the country from which they are national. We are passing from the concept of ‘migrant’ to the concept of ‘foreigner’: national from a country in opposition to the natives of another.

In a first view, the concept of foreigner refers to geography, science that studies habitat. The concept of foreigner is perceived as the difference between groups that live in or out of an imaginary border, frontier between ‘us’ and the ‘other’. But in fact when we use ‘foreigner’ we use no geographic concept, we are not referring to the river or mountain that sets up the legal border. We are defining a legal limit.

In defining ‘foreigner’, and we do it according to the law, we limit legally, for a group of our neighbours, the rights that according to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights are established for all human beings. ‘The new nation-state finds here its new enemy: the foreign residents who request their own parcel of sovereign power, and who want to share the benefits of the national inheritance.’

The ‘civil citizenship’ concept, recognised in Notification 757 of the European Commission of 22-11-2000, identifies the nature of citizen with that of resident surpassing the limited concept of ‘national’. The Notification also refers to integration as a two-way process that involves adaptation on the parts of both the immigrant and the adopting society. The ‘civil citizenship’ is the hope in the fight between the culture of the civil rights and that of economic rationalism.

What’s clear is that Europe represents Human Rights, which is its identity. It’s what is sold in the world. When they go to South America to do business, when they travel to other places, Europeans say: ‘We are respectful, we are not like the United States that subjugate others, we do not meddle with your political affairs, we have a model welfare state, we are not so neo-liberal’, etc. But in practice, in the Argentinian crisis, Spanish banks are no better or worse than English or American banks, they aren’t any different. European capital is founded on the progress of economic accumulation, and this is the axis of everything (Walter).

SPAIN, A COUNTRY OF EMIGRANTS

There are no official figures for the flow of emigrants from Spain in the colonial times, but it is clear that the flow to South America decreased in the eighteenth Century, because of the restrictive laws passed by independent republics hindering emigration and the legal restrictions to emigration. In 1853 the restrictions to emigration were lifted for residents in the Canary Islands and in 1865 for the rest of Spain; simultaneously, Latin American new nations began their policies of recruiting immigrants. In 1898, the year of the independence of the Republic of Cuba, Spain lost its last territory in America. The Spanish government, motivated by the ‘Fourth Centennial of the discovery of America’, initiated an ‘Approximation policy’ to reopen the doors of Latin American countries to Spanish emigration. Between
1885 and 1930 over 4.5 million Spanish citizens migrated to America, of a home population of 23.5 million.

In the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War caused the exile of the defenders of the 2nd Republic whose legitimate government was thrown out by a military coup-d’état. In the months prior to the end of the war in April 1939, over 400,000 Spaniards crossed the French border. If we add those that departed from different maritime ports, the total number of exiles amounted to 500,000.

Until the revocation of the Decree of 1941, which prohibited the departure of workers abroad, these figures were modest. However between 1946 and 1976, 2,600,000 economic migrants left the country whose population then numbered 30 million inhabitants. Now Europe substituted the traditional American destination.

Only after 1987 the migratory flow becomes negative. In 1995, nearly 800,000 Spaniards were still living and working in Europe and over 1,400,000 in America.

Spain is a country that traditionally has expelled emigrants. More than

Table 1  **Spanish emigration 1850–1930**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>population (thousand of inhabit.)</th>
<th>total migration</th>
<th>% migrants (by 1.000 inhabit.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>15.455</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>15.645</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>16.622</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>17.550</td>
<td>287.399</td>
<td>16,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>18.109</td>
<td>882.822</td>
<td>48,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>18.618</td>
<td>163.778</td>
<td>8,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>19.995</td>
<td>1.183.264</td>
<td>59,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>21.390</td>
<td>1.272.387</td>
<td>59,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>23.677</td>
<td>860.447</td>
<td>36,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.650.097</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: INE, Geographical Institute, Department of Employment and Social Affairs (MTAS). Elaborated by the Dirección General de Ordenación de las Migraciones.

Table 2  **Spanish emigration 1940–2000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>population (thousand of inhab.)</th>
<th>total migration</th>
<th>% migrants (by 1.000)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>26.015</td>
<td>245.753</td>
<td>9,4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>28.118</td>
<td>257.318</td>
<td>9,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>30.583</td>
<td>649.039</td>
<td>21,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>33.823</td>
<td>919.606</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>37.616</td>
<td>513.112</td>
<td>13,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>39.434</td>
<td>74.406</td>
<td>1,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,659.234</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: INE, Geographical Institute, Department of Labour and Social Affairs (MTAS). Elaborated by the Dirección General de Ordenación de las Migraciones.
7,300,000 Spaniards became migrants in the last century. The memory of Spanish people is the memory of migrations.

ALIENS IN SPAIN: FROM NO POLICY TO THE POLICY OF FEAR

In fact, no law regulated the residence of aliens in Spain until 1985. The Organic Law 7/1985 of 1 July in 1985, on the Rights and Liberties of Foreigners in Spain, ‘basically followed three factors. The entry in the European Union obliged Spanish laws to adopt community patrimony. The different regulations had to be systematised. And it was necessary to face the new situation: the presence of foreigners in Spain.‘9 This meant the presence of 98,575 non-community foreigners among the population of 40 million. Fifteen years later, in 2000, the number has increased (659,179 among the same 40 million) but the relative figure continues to be extremely low in relation to the foreign populations of other European nations.

In recent years, and especially since the elections in 2001 when the conservative Popular Party (PP) obtained an absolute majority, both the Spanish Government and the mass media have used terms such as ‘problem’, ‘criminality’, and ‘avalanche’ to refer to immigrants. This situation is even more serious if we consider that, until that point, it had been accepted that the migration issue was too important and complex to be used as a barbed political weapon. During the entire year in 2000, a Parliamentary Commission in the Lower House prepared a reform of the 1985 law, based on the consensus that it was necessary to arrange an actual immigration policy. In this parliamentary commission, the political parties with parliamentary representation, the social organisations, and the associations of immigrants expressed their opinions. The discussion centred on all the basic points: border control, integration of regular immigrants and regularisation of status for people who entered as tourists or without a visa.

In this pre-electoral time a new political force emerged: the ‘GIL’ Party. The racist speech of the president, a very well known figure, president of a popular football team, frightened the PP leaders with the possibility of losing votes on the right. Then, the Popular Party infringed the pact (which included a member of his own group) and in the middle of the electoral campaign, the Minister of Home Office Mayor Oreja promised to change

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Table 3  Foreigners in Spain by continents of origin 1975–2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>EU (non-EU)</th>
<th>Europe (non-EU)</th>
<th>America</th>
<th>Africa</th>
<th>Asia</th>
<th>Oceania</th>
<th>total (non-EU)</th>
<th>overall total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>92,917</td>
<td>9,785</td>
<td>48,142</td>
<td>3,232</td>
<td>9,393</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>165.289</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>106,738</td>
<td>11,634</td>
<td>46,701</td>
<td>4,067</td>
<td>11,419</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>182.045</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>142,346</td>
<td>15,780</td>
<td>54,067</td>
<td>8,529</td>
<td>19,451</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>241,971</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>158,243</td>
<td>22,492</td>
<td>83,558</td>
<td>63,054</td>
<td>29,116</td>
<td>1,103</td>
<td>360,655</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>235,858</td>
<td>19,844</td>
<td>108,932</td>
<td>95,718</td>
<td>38,352</td>
<td>733</td>
<td>499,773</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>449,881</td>
<td>65,179</td>
<td>659,179</td>
<td>1,109,060</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: INE, Geographical Institute, Department of Labour and Social Affairs (MTAS). Elaborated by the Dirección General de Ordenación de las Migraciones.
the law of consensus in which the Parliamentary Commission had been working on for eight months. The episode concluded with some scandalous racist actions taking place in the town of El Ejido. The Popular Party’s Minister of Labour and Social Affairs resigned and abandoned politics. The revised 2000 law never became operational, and the new 2001 law turned back to the previous law of 1985. It was a situation which paralleled the rise of the Australian One Nation party.

The political temptation to mobilise xenophobia is incompatible with a rational immigration program. Such a program also requires a more human approach to issues like family reunion, settlement services and refugees. A cost-free program sounds very attractive, but immigrants are not simply factors of production. To paraphrase a German saying: ‘We sought only workers but we got people’. Future governments may need to be less rigid, less obsessive, less directed by public prejudice and more human than they had become by the 1990s.9

The GIL party almost disappeared, but its populist demands have been incorporated to the discourse not only in the PP, but also in the PSOE (Socialist Party): zero net migration, strict selection for the family reunion categories, detention and expulsion for undocumented or illegal arrivals.

The political discourse has not created this situation. But it has promoted, established, and helped to formulate it. Furthermore, we have the argument that we will bring the ultra right to a stop, and the political message firmly insists that immigration is one of the greatest challenges of Western democracies. The Right has been preaching this political message, and generally the European establishment has sustained this idea over several years ago. During the Socialist Party era (PSOE, 1982–1996) some Home Office Ministers repeated this goal but it wasn’t accepted. They went to the Home Office Coordination Meetings and came back with this policy that migrations were one of the greatest challenges, even for NATO. Do not forget that NATO no longer has an enemy, because the Eastern Bloc era has ended, and one of the elements that NATO constructed as a potential enemy have been the immigrants. It is an ideological, political, and discursive construction which is also a daily fact being built for many years in Europe, and which has really just now started to be applied in Spain. Because until recently, it was politically incorrect and people could not say ‘I am fed up that there are so many blacks and sudacas [Latin Americans] and I don’t know what all’. Now, they can. There are still people who are reluctant to express this, but there are those who do that (Walter).

Commissioned by a collective of associations supporting immigrants to Spain, I asked the leader of the PSOE about their party’s immigration policy. I was really worried when he answered me with a populist anecdote: the limit of his policy was a 50-year-old woman, a voter for his party, who told him that she was to be dismissed because an illegal immigrant was going to work in her place. As Jupp writes, referring to the impact of One Nation in Australia:

Displaced resentment is a very common phenomenon. People cannot explain the unseen economic and social forces, which are changing their lives, often for the worse. They tend to blame observable agents, especially ethnic or religious minorities. Globalisation and economic
rationalism disturbed many lives, but could be neither understood nor challenged.  

FEAR OF WORDS

Montserrat Ribas, in her thesis, The Representation of Immigration Arising from the Questions of a Parliamentary Study Commission, highlights how the dominant ideologies have introduced models, scripts, stereotypes etc. — through public speeches and staged events, which intervene in the construction of the representations that individuals use to describe the world. She writes.

We learn to perceive the world by means of beliefs and thus by prejudices which surround us and which generally form part of the dominant discourse. To liberate oneself from the social prejudices that are channeled in this discourse means becoming aware of how inadequate these representations are, and as a result, adopting a critical attitude.  

Walter continues:

Furthermore, the PP President Aznar said [in 2002] that ‘immigrants are delinquents’. People say this to me in many debates: ‘the President of the Government said it’, or ‘It says in the press that … ’ which is giving coverage to this view. Now they are providing coverage to some existing social occurrences; the politicians did not create them. Obviously, they feed back into themselves. With a different type of discourse and other practices, we could be in another situation.

For eight years, I have worked with the applicants for asylum and immigration. I have witnessed these setbacks, and the ideological deployment that has occurred in giant leaps in Spain in the ways of perceiving ‘us’ and the ‘other’. At present, there are more Spanish emigrants than immigrants in Spain — Spain is a nation of emigrants — but the official version proposes a changed perspective of the national identity, which promotes the idea that Spaniards are being threatened by a flood of poor people. This fallacy is especially serious in a country that has inadequate coverage of social services and where the economy is still fragile, since only its geographical proximity in Europe makes it possible to put out this message. Hence, it is necessary to struggle for the construction of a European Union which protects the equality of political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Spain is a country of the newly rich with a fragile welfare state structure:

As it has been repeatedly denounced, the so-called ‘immigration problem’ is usually formulated in the political discourse above all as a problem-hindrance, a created problem, or better still, a problem blown out of proportion in order to exploit it. And for this reason, there is no real political willingness to act in a serious way … It appears that we have still failed to learn that fear is power’s only resource when it is not willing to be democratic or socially responsible, and thus immigration has become a goldmine for these fear-traffickers.

Walter’s comment:

The political systems are the way they are supposed to be, right? And the stability of the insider politicians is also maintained with the minimum degree of legitimacy. And today they are finding this legitimisation. Because they were legitimated before: ‘We will create
a welfare state so that the Communists won’t win’, now ‘let’s defend this society and our achievements against the danger that the starving masses of the Third World represent (Walter).

THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Bertaux observes:

The choice of a particular method to study this or that sociological object, is not a nonsense issue. It commits the researcher to a specific field relationship, to several existential practices; it contains as a watermark some ways of thinking and it excludes others. In short, some years of the life of a researcher are at stake. As long as he/she controls the election of method, the choice will be made more related to deep preferences than rational considerations.13

I have been involved in immigration and asylum policy in the last eight years. At present asylum and migration research requires a high level of activism, commitment, and personal involvement, as well as distance, professionalism, analysis, and permanent self-criticism. The opinions I express are based on discussions with a wide range of people in the course of conferences, committees, seminars and interviews. Thus methods which involve the use of oral sources are almost therapeutic. And as Jupp notes, ‘As the whole area is contentious and politised, it will be clear that I prefer some view-points to others.’14

So I have selected four ‘ideal spokespersons’ as Bertaux would put it, referring to Oscar Lewis’s Los Hijos de Sánchez: the four stories have the intensity of autobiographies. Of course, in this text I can show only a little part of their discourse. My approach to all of them, like Bertaux, has covered the changes of attitude of the researcher who works with life stories along the research:

in the beginning his attitude is as an explorer. Later he seeks contrasting his interpretations, makes them be refuted, differentiates them, details them, consolidates them, in short, if he wants to restore the voices of human experience in their whole expressive power, he must again change his attitude: he must establish a relationship of interchange and friendship. He must take time to enter the other’s universe.15

During the last ten years I have combined exploratory, analytic and synthetic stages, adopting the approach of a political scientist and a participant. We have been colleagues, students, friends, spectators; we have met each other in different working or political situations. As a result of this process, different products have been made (masters theses, dossiers, applications for asylum, projects, conferences, a theatre play etc.) that are transformed into written sources, and others (video recordings) that we analyse as oral sources. And along this process there have been personal and professional relationships, of friendship and collaboration, of interest and mistrust, which have been superimposed.

Here they are. Valentín, Walter, Luzmar and Rita. They express their opinions because they have the option to do so. They are not obsessed with day-to-day concerns. They have the opportunity to analyse their reality and they do so with a critical, political, and
conscious vision. Referring to multiculturalism in Australia, Jupp says, ‘I accept that politicians must work within the limits set by public opinion. But I do not accept that majority opinion is always right. Changing public opinion is a necessary feature of democracy and, in this area, often essential.’ This is also my belief and the reason of the title, ‘Consciousness’.

FOREIGNER, IMMIGRANT, TOURIST

Walter:

An image of foreigners is being built little by little: which is that they are poor people from the Third World who could represent a reason for uneasiness or a problem that did not exist before. Furthermore, when I came to Spain, ‘foreigner’ was not a synonym for ‘immigrant’. It was a synonym for ‘tourist’. And a tourist was a synonym for more open customs, more money, open-minded attitudes, from Europe and the North, for all the things that people desired which did not exist in Spain. And now ‘foreigner’ has become split. It still means ‘tourist’, but on the other hand, immigration is a problem, a source of unease and potential conflict. And in this respect, this immigration includes the Moroccan stereotype, that appears to be the strangest, the most different, and the least likely to assimilate here – as some people say. Today this is applied to the Moroccans but it could be applied to a person from Uruguay or Chile tomorrow, it makes no difference.

This did not exist here before. But it was because no one had constructed this image. There were immigrants, there were foreigners, people from the Philippines, but this was not structured within the image of someone who could be dangerous, or the origin of conflicts. There were Filipino domestic servants whom the Spanish ladies did not treat on an equal basis, but it was a group that was here. Granted, there were Argentinians and Chileans, who were a bit more rebellious, and formed organisations, but they are there. They were not something that could constitute a risk or a source of problems. And this is exactly what is being constructed now (Walter).

SPAIN, A COUNTRY OF IMMIGRANTS

Valentin:

Here, people toy with the old image of the mother country, especially after the 500th Anniversary of the Conquest, the ‘legacy of the language’, and so on. It appears that many who believe in this idea think that Spain will adopt them, and will do so in a way that makes them feel different. But I feel the contrary. When they talk about ‘sudacas’ (slang for South Americans), we are all in the same boat. And the most painful thing for me is to witness how the Moroccans are treated, which is just too much, too much to bear. The African people are the ones who are mistreated. As an immigrant, it is tragic to see how someone who arrives at the Barajas airport is immediately sent back to his country on the same plane, who is then expelled again upon his return, something that almost no one sees. But here, the people that cross the Strait, I have watched die on the beaches, which is extremely hard and tragic. And witnessed the contempt that exists in Spain and the watchdog role that it performs for the European Union which is to block the entry of people from Africa. This is where I notice the clearest difference. Despite the fact that Latin Americans are not at all well treated, there are many others who are treated worse than us. I believe that here we are more
or less accepted because we speak the
language. And we are not completely black
either, they call us dark-skinned, morenazos
as they say here, but this is not good or bad,
there are people out there who really get
carried away. But as for black people, this is
where the most embedded racism exists and
their contempt for poverty, this is the daily
reality (Valentín).

Luzmar:

The social conditions for the people that arrive
here are far from ideal. Beginning with the
framework of the law governing aliens. The
1985 law was very restrictive; later there was
the law 4/2000, which was a bit more
extensive but it was no panacea; and we have
gone back light years in the restriction of
rights. This means that people face much
greater obstacles to obtain a work permit, an
essential item. To me, I cannot imagine why
a human being needs to have a permit to work
and to make a living for himself and his
family. This is something that I have learned
here. In Colombia, everyone has the right to
work. In Africa, everyone has the right to
work and to make a decent living. Here, it is
necessary to have a work and residency permit
to be able to live and work. This conditions
people’s lives, restricts their rights, and
coerces their freedom (Luzmar).

Rita:

A girl that I met in Guinea, in her innocence
she said: ‘Is it true that there is a little hole
in the door in Spain, and that people look
through it to see who is on the other side?
And if they are hungry or cold, if you don’t
know them, then you don’t let them in?’ She
just couldn’t understand! A person that is
hungry or cold: you don’t let him in when he
knocks on your door because you look to see
who it is. Obviously, she does not understand.
This is very important, because it is a
metaphor that describes what happens in
developed countries. There is a peephole.
Europe is looking at the colour of your skin,
where you come from, and whether you have
enough money to enter or not (Rita).

ENDNOTES

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2 J.E. Stiglitz, Globalization and Discontents,
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4 Rev. Martin Niemöller, 1945, generally
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came for the Communists, and I didn’t
speak up, because I wasn’t a
Communist. Then they came for the
Jews, and I didn’t speak up, because I
wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the
Catholics, and I didn’t speak up, because I
wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the
Catholics, and I didn’t speak up, because I
was a Protestant. Then they came for
me, and by that time there was no one
left to speak up for me.’
5 F. Olivan López, Extranjero, Terminología
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9 Jim Jupp, From White Australia to
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10 Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera*, p. 123.


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CROSSING BORDERS AND TRANSFORMING IDENTITIES:
ENCOUNTERING DIASPORIC MEXICANNESS IN AUSTRALIA

GABRIELA CORONADO

National borders and identities are interrelated in complex, dynamic and dialogic ways. When one moves to live in a new country, there is a tendency to believe that by crossing different borders (whether concrete and symbolic, spatial, linguistic or cultural), the original cultural identity is at risk of disappearing because of the need to be accepted by the recipient country and the pressures to follow mainstream ways to become a member of the new society. From a self-reflective perspective in this article I show that the dynamics of social and cultural interaction create multiple paradoxes that transform the ways identities are developed, created and even invented in the process of migration and settlement. From my own experience as a recent ‘ethnic’ migrant in Australia, I will focus on some strategies developed by diasporic communities to define themselves by making borders and identities fuzzier, and ‘playing’ representations to manipulate ideologies. Through my personal gaze I will question rigid representations of Mexicanness and Mexican culture and emphasise the paradoxical outcome that, instead of borders defining identities, identities simultaneously create new borders and break others.

Geographic borders between countries set limits to the space, physical and social, where the notions of national culture and identity are created, transmitted, used and transformed. This process is basic for the construction of social and ideological collective actions, in which each individual identifies with and is identified as part of the group, building collective representations to differentiate them from others. These identities are dynamic, always in the process of ‘construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or related sets of cultural attributes, that is/are given priority over other sources of meaning’. These representations serve to construct relations of cohesion or differentiation. They are not essences but are defined in cultural and historical terms, and create different narratives around specific concrete events, functioning to construct relationships, actual and potential.

The multiple possibilities of cultural representations of identities are internalised and used consciously or unconsciously in everyday life. They are also constructed through the continuous ideological meanings transmitted by the different state apparatuses, such as the school, by hegemonic discourses, the church and the media. They also evolve...
and change in dialogic interaction with others, those who share some of the meanings and those who are outside the borders, but still in some kind of interaction.

Borders, however, are much more than the geographical delimitations of a territory, and the experience of borders ‘can happen whenever and wherever two or more cultures meet peacefully or violently’. Borders, from being concrete, crisp markers of different countries, national cultures, languages, become virtual, symbolic and therefore mobile. They appear each time an interaction with others happens, each time individuals represent the distinctiveness of their culture. In social interactions borders are not so rigid, and meanings flow through more or less easily, depending on the conditions and the issues that are negotiated in each exchange. As communication happens between two parties (by any means) dialogue makes borders fuzzy, transforming them into spaces for contact, into inter-zones for co-construction of meaning. In this sense borders simultaneously separate and bond.

In contemporary society the intercultural negotiation of identities has become everywhere an everyday experience. Whether it results from migration, travelling for pleasure, business or through use of global means of communication, in all cases the representation of identities varies depending on the kind of interaction, its political or ideological function, and the context of the encounter. In each case individuals, as social actors, activate their repertoire of cultural meanings from the country of origin and from their experiences of other cultures, to express their cultural values, their interest in other languages, their social experience and historical knowledge. All these resources, which are shared in some degree by others from the same country or from the new environment, are used in interaction to construct solidarity or mark difference. In some ways each intercultural exchange implies a kind of ‘journey’ where the meanings of cultures and identities are carried into different contexts to negotiate, reinforce or transform the position of each one in the new context of interaction. In the case of migration, which is the specific focus of this article, the journey involves crossing physical borders to be outside one’s own country, and to go into other cultures.

Journeys in this case are not only subjective but concrete displacements in time and space. They may be diasporas, with no immediate return, forming or entering new communities inside other larger communities. Diasporas ‘constitute routes and roots, forms of community and solidarity outside of the time and national space with the aim to be inside [another country and culture] but keeping the difference’. Diasporic communities create forms of organisation and identity which build more or less rigid borders around them to emphasise their difference, in language or culture. Inside those borders diasporic communities recreate a culture and identity which is related to the culture of origin but evolves in new ways to relate to the new external environment. Diasporic communities use every resource to survive collectively in adverse conditions, reproducing, transforming and inventing specific forms of identity to make clear their distinctiveness, creating ‘resistance identities’ as cohesive strategies against the risk of cultural disappearance under the pressures of assimilation, or against a disadvantaged position in a country dominated by one culture-language-race.
Sharing meanings as part of a diasporic community may help make the process of settlement easier. Communication flows inside the community, with fewer risks of misunderstandings, or that is what it is commonly believed. In consequence, if you are in an alien environment you try to find spaces where there are common meanings to communicate, to feel ‘safe’ inside the borders of communities created by other migrants. In general, the more you share the more you feel part of a collective, so you are able to belong, although this belonging carries the risk of not belonging to the community of destination, not to be accepted by the ‘other’. Migration brings a permanent dilemma, a continual need to make choices and travel through borders, avoiding crisp barriers, selecting how and where to belong.

Inside the borders built by diaspora communities in the new environment are the ones who hold membership, who share the place of birth, the culture, the language, the religion, the race, and the fact that they are all aliens to those outside. Inside they form a social network that works as a reciprocal support for all, increasing the possibilities for each to succeed in the place of residency, and perhaps, of nationality. Legal and ‘undocumented’ migrant Mexicans in the US are in this category. Mexicans in the US form networks to support each other, to get jobs, to guide newcomers in understanding the new environment, although in the US, many Mexicans resist being nationalised as if their Mexicanness were at risk. Apparently, to become ‘gringo’ is seen by other Mexicans on both sides of the border as a betrayal.

These feelings represent the dilemma which is part of the dynamic experience of migration: moving from one country to another, leaving one culture to understand and fit in another, learning a language feeling that maybe you will never feel sufficiently competent and at the same time fearing to lose spontaneity in your first language. The feelings of betrayal are captured in songs; for example in the song ‘Mis dos patrias’ (My two fatherlands) from a famous group in Mexico and the US, Los Tigres del Norte. Its lyrics express clearly the dilemma for migrants who decide to acquire a new nationality, and the social pressures to which they are exposed. In this song the change of nationality is seen as a threat to the identity of the country of origin:

To the ones who call me anti-Mexican and betrayer of my nation and my flag
And to break the frontiers with my song, I will open completely my heart.
I left the tombs of my parents and grandparents, I arrived crying to the land of Anglo-Saxons.
I worked while my children grew, all of them born in this great nation
But my rights have been trampled on by the change of laws in the constitution
What will I do if when I’m old they take all my money? I only want my insurance and pension.
What’s the matter if I am now an American citizen, I’m still Mexican, like pulque and nopal
To defend the rights of my race my brothers, Central and South Americans, Caribbeans or Cubans have tropical blood
There is space for two countries in one heart.
The day of the oath of allegiance the judge stood up in the court.
My heart was crying with salt tears, which burned inside me.
Two flags troubled me. One green,
white and red, with the eagle in the centre
The other with its blue full of stars, with red and white bars, of my children, who happily gazed at me.

Do not call me a betrayer. I love my two fatherlands.
In one I left my dead ones, and my children grew up here.
I cannot be a betrayer for defending my own rights.5

This dilemma does not always create such conflicts as in the case of Mexican immigrants in the US, where intercultural interaction triggers complex meanings and ideologies from a long, complex relationship that historically includes a vastly unequal power relationship between the country of origin and the ‘host’ country, which in this case is not very welcoming.6 In other countries where the relationship is less close and conflictual, citizenship is a practical option, less threatening to the original identity, especially as dual nationality is increasingly accepted in many countries, including Mexico.

MY JOURNEY OF IDENTITY

As a Mexican, living in Mexico all my life, borders were more or less clear and rigid. I lived inside the territory of Mexico, surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico, the Pacific Ocean, the Rio Bravo between Mexico and the United States and the border between Mexico and Central America. I also lived inside the borders created by a language, Spanish, which restricts the possibilities of interaction with speakers of other languages, but simultaneously creates a wide language community, which includes all Hispanic America and Spain. The border of language in Mexico is also ideological: Spanish means non-English, non-American.7 I also lived in a culture which is simultaneously Western and not-Western. Like all cultures, the Mexican is not homogeneous nor static, but a culture in process. Nevertheless it is represented in interactions as clearly distinct from other cultures, emphasising elements that are more positive and distinctive to show its unique character.

The uniqueness of a culture, especially in a context of continuous intercultural exchanges, as has been the case in Mexican culture, is represented through images constructed from inside the country and also in a dialogic process with external understandings. These images are full of stereotypes, imagined representations and contradictions that have been used and developed at different moments of history, in interactions with other nations and cultures. One nuclear part of Mexican identity is its indianness. As a historic fact Indian peoples and Mesoamerican civilisations are the original inhabitants and cultures of the territory now called Mexico. Spanish culture and people are also part of the history. The encounters between Spanish and Indigenous peoples, as conflict or mestizaje (‘mixing’), are part of what all Mexicans know and share as our history. Mexicanness comes from the mixing of two cultures that have interacted for more than 500 years, reproducing, resisting, transforming and creating new meanings, represented in customs, and cultural products.8 Although the culture has continuously changed some representations produced by this multicultural exchange have been used by some groups to construct symbols of Mexican identity. What was
A vital identity in the past has been frozen so it can function as the ‘official’, public representation of Mexicanness, in stereotypical symbols of Mexican culture and national identity.

In this context some elements come to mind in trying to define Mexicanness:

- prehispanic monuments;
- colourful handicrafts;
- beautiful embroidered clothes;
- the Mexican hat (sombrero de charro);
- traditional musicians (los mariachis);
- cultural events, such as Las Posada, with their piñatas, or the Day of the Dead with its skulls of sugar and paper skeletons;
- Mexican food: mole, tacos, chile, atole, tamales etc.9

Other elements of identity come from a shared knowledge of history, or histories, the most relevant in my view being:

- Independence Day, celebrated in all central plazas as El Grito;
- Religious beliefs associated with manifestations of the Guadalupe Virgin to an Indian.

Those features of Mexican identity are familiar to everyone in Mexico and to many outside. Some are still important as signs of Mexicanness and used by many Mexican people of all ages on some occasions. But their significance changes when they are embedded in intercultural and international interaction, used to represent Mexicanness to outsiders and to sell Mexico as a tourist commodity. Within Mexico, some of those features as they appear in everyday life are regarded as markers of class. They are associated with Indians, with poverty in rural life and urban popular culture. They are seen as kitsch in the houses of American US or Europeans who live in Mexico, but signs of low class and bad taste in the houses of lower-class Mexicans.

Six years ago I decided to come to Australia for professional and personal reasons. I knew I was beginning a journey across borders, but at that moment did not expect a transformation of identities. The first border was inside Mexico City, the Australian Embassy, a nice, spacious building in Polanco, one of the greenest and wealthiest neighbourhoods of the city. The first things I saw when entering the room were some beautiful Mimi figures, as good as any I have seen in any museum in Australia. In the rear was a big window where I could see a nice, well cared for internal garden. I became captivated, wanting to come as soon as possible to see more — more of the culture of Aboriginal people, more of Australia’s natural wonders. That was the image the embassy was offering so successfully. Then I went to the visa desk. No one else was applying for a visa. It was a very strange feeling as we Mexicans are so used to making queues; this was a bonus, building a sense of what it would be like to move from one of the biggest cities of the world whose population is greater than the whole of Australia.

Applying for my visa I suddenly became part of the South American block, with its capital in Chile. Australia abroad is organised in regional divisions. As the officer explained, Mexico belongs to the South American region and everything is managed from the centre, located in Chile. As a consequence, I became a South American, implicitly viewed with suspicion as a potential illegal, a potentially sick person wanting to get free medical treatment, likely to be a political refugee, a traumatised survivor from a dictatorship or from the drug wars. Nothing was making sense for me. I just
wanted to come to study with an Australian scholarship I had won, living on my salary from a Research Centre in Mexico. In the Australian Embassy to be ‘South American’ means that you need to be well off to deserve an Australian visa: you need a house, car, credit card, US dollars, a permanent job, university fees and medical insurance. In one sense they were right, I was a potential migrant, but not of the kind that immigration fears, aiming to stay illegally or become another burden for the welfare system.

After a month filling in forms, getting letters to probe my economic sustainability, medical exams and my return ticket (for a four-year program?), I got the visa and boarded the plane to cross other borders. One was the language, Australian English, completely incomprehensible, very little to do with what I learned in the classroom of AmericanUS language schools in Mexico. Then I arrived at another border, the Immigration desk at the airport of Sydney. Having crossed the border of the embassy, the airport one was easy, although I never understood, partly because of my insufficient English, and partly because of ignorance, why the immigration official looked at me with suspicion about the ‘contradiction’ of coming from Mexico while saying no to the question about whether in the last month I had been in Africa, Asia or South America.

Later I realised that according to Australian cartography, Mexico is in South America. It was not only the product of Australia’s rationalisation of its embassies overseas, as I had thought in Mexico. For Australians, Mexico is in South America, and not in North America as I learned when I was at school. Coming to Australia suddenly the borders changed, and the Rio Bravo, the border between Mexico and the United States, became the border between the North and the South, between the First and Third Worlds, between English and Spanish. This surely comes from the meaning of the same border in the AmericanUS imagination, in which the border between Mexico and US has mythical implications of national security. This border is where the Third World begins, the separation between North and South. Mexico is part of North America in the NAFTA agreement, but still in the South. I still have not learned that lesson, or maybe I do not want to learn it. When I am asked if I am from South America I say spontaneously ‘No’. I am beginning to answer, after some hesitation, ‘From Mexico’, but never ‘Yes’.

During my life in Australia, studying at an Australian university, learning to speak and write in another language, and living with an Australian I became more conscious about the differences and similarities, activating new skills to respond to the demands of social interculturality. To be a Mexican outside Mexico, in my case in Australia, demands some behaviours that are considered proper for a Mexican. Suddenly I needed more knowledge about Mexico, its history, economy, folklore, politics and all its tourist destinations, from beaches to colonial cities, and of course prehispanic sites. I was required to be a Mexican expert on all issues related to the specialisation of people I was interacting with. At the same time I needed to simplify the realities of my country. Against my preference to look for diversity I was pushed to build a more or less homogenous Mexico, though I resisted reducing it entirely to stereotypes. I also felt the duty to show a more
accurate understanding of the aspects that are regarded as signs of Mexicanness. The pressures of being in another country were transforming my Mexicanness, trying to look ‘more respectable’ for foreign eyes than the type of Mexican I am in contemporary American USised Mexico.

Another feature added to my identity in Australia was ethnicity. Here I am ‘ethnic’. Given that the word ‘ethnic’ refers to the fact that ‘each of us is shaped by and towards the culture in which we are born’, everybody is an ‘ethnic’. However, ‘ethnic, as a label, has tended to be attached to the periphery or margin by the western viewpoint of modernity’. ‘Ethnic’ is used to refer to traditional cultures that are considered in some ways as ‘primitive’. In Australia to be an ethnic minority is to be the other, the alien. Not all migrants are ‘ethnic’: the term is applied to those who are different compared to the cultural features of mainstream Australia, of Anglo-Australia.

Officially, I am ‘ethnic’ because I have a non-English language background (NESB), because I speak English as a second language. In this sense I share an identity with Chinese, Sri Lankans, Indonesian, Italians, Greeks, Maltese, Bulgarians, Russians, French, Filipinos etc. I do not know however if all these groups would like to be part of this big community. Actually this shared identity is not even an ‘imagined community’, it is just unreal, but virtually it divides the world in two, ‘primitives’ and English speakers.

To be an ethnic in this sense imposes some borders that need to be crossed. Australia’s multiculturalism and equal opportunity provisions do not save people from the disadvantage of being from another linguistic group. English is the dominant language that you need to learn to interact in everyday life, to study, to get a job. This border is as fuzzy as other borders and some accents, some mixes of languages are more acceptable than others. I guess many other ideological and political aspects are involved, but I haven’t experienced clearly the imposition of a strict linguistic border. My accent is more or less accepted, I believe, and the reactions I have experienced to my accent focus on its unfamiliarity which frequently leads to question about my country of origin. My answer almost always provokes the comment: ‘Oh! how interesting’, a positive new feature to include in my identity. In Australia I have an ‘interesting’ identity, and I suppose I will not lose it as probably I will never lose my accent.

There are not many Mexicans in Australia: around 500, according to the Mexican Embassy list. There is an association in Sydney, the Mexican Australian Welfare Association Incorporated (MAWAI), a diasporic ‘ethnic’ community with highly fuzzy boundaries, which consists ‘of people of Mexican descent, Mexicans who live in Australia, friends of Mexicans and anyone interested in Mexico or Mexican Culture’. From this list it is clear that this diasporic community is very open, very inclusive. According to their self representation the ‘aim of this community is to make Mexicans residing in Australia … feel less lonely and not too far from their own families, customs, food and traditions’.

In many ways my experience as migrant is not typical compared to the experience of other migrants who form diasporic communities such as the
MAWA. I have not tried to be part of the Mexican community in Australia, probably because I have not felt the need to belong to that kind of community to survive as an alien or to get support from others who might understand me better because of the shared cultural identity. I haven’t felt alone among Australians, nor thought that sharing with other Mexicans will make me less sad at being so far from my family, and from friends in Mexico, many of whom come from other countries, as is common now in increasingly multicultural cities.

Communities in diasporas develop forms of identities, making the representation of the diasporic identity of Mexicans important in relation to the new environment. The represented identity of the diasporic community expresses in some ways ‘authentic’ Mexicanness in Australia, which is visible in the web page of the association. In it you can find written and visual texts connected to the events that Mexicans celebrate in Australia, which include traditional cultural and patriotic representations of Mexicanness: flags, folkloric dances, piñatas, calaveras (skeletons and skulls), sombreros de charro (the Mexican Hat) (Figure 1). The only event not of this kind was a bush walk, which may be related to the Australianisation of the Mexican community, or a common activity in many cities where people go out to escape from urban stress, or maybe a nostalgic connection with rural life in their place of origin. I have not researched the relevance of this event for Mexicans, but I can see in it the potential sign of paradoxes of diasporic identities, as the simultaneity of contrasting representations in dialogue with the new environment. Still, Mexican hats, singers and guitars were there.

As is common in representations of identities in social interaction, the public image of the association selects the images to be shown from a wider range of cultural practices and actual events which contain a more complex expression of culture and identity. Comparing the images displayed in the web page from the Independence Day party in 2001 with the same event in 2002, which I attended, I was able to see, and feel, a Mexicanness that is closer to my experience in Mexico. The actual party to celebrate Mexican independence brought together some signs of tradition with transnational representations of the culture, which would not be seen as Mexican but feel like ‘being in Mexico’. As a whole this event was different to what I was expecting from the images shown on the web page, which represented a very Mexican community. On the web page the images of a Mexican celebration look more stereotypical than the way they are performed in Mexico, very close to a tourist performance: folkloric dances; Mexican hats and Mariachis; and green, white and red decorations with flags and china paper. In the actual event there were other aspects that were unexpected and less ‘Mexican’.

I would like to compare now the same event as it happens in Mexico. Independence day in Mexico, called El Grito, is one of the occasions when Mexican food must be included. Tostadas, tacos and pozole are the most common in every house that day, and they are sold in the streets around the different plazas. But in the celebration in Australia the only Mexican food was a chilli sauce with corn chips as an entrée. The music was mixed, including some traditional Mexican music that drove me back to my teenage years, and contemporary dance music,
Figure 1
MWAI web page, accessed October 2003

Figure 2

Figure 3
the same kind you can hear in any party in Mexico, some in English, others in Spanish. Overall the web page looks more Mexican than the same event in Mexico but the Australian event was less Mexican than the same celebration in Mexico. Paradoxically it had the same feeling as being in Mexico, but in a non ‘Mexican’ party. The common symbol in the three representations is the flag with its three colours, green, white and red. It is the patriotic national sign that seems unchanged by the diasporic experience.

From this experience I am able to see the double representation of Mexicanness, one more public, more expected by Australians, the other more private, shared with friends from other Latin American or Australian communities. In the ‘private’ one everyone brings memories from their time in Mexico or from their last visit, a typical item of clothing, a flag, the new CD played on the radio stations there or a loved disc that has just been recorded in the new CD format. In that sense the diasporic community provides two forms of Mexicanness, which are linked and used both to relate to the new country and to keep the continuity of identity with the country of origin.

Other representations of ‘authentic Mexicanness’, which are accessible outside Mexico and generate some expectations among Australians, come from discourses of tourism, which transform people and culture into commodities, and also feed the images of national identities in a stereotypical way. To find how this kind of representation was constructed for Australians I looked at the Mexican Embassy web page. In my view this page reflects tourist representations of Mexico, which have some affinities with the Mexican identity in diaspora as depicted on the Mexican Association web page. The representations of Mexicanness on the main page consist mainly of pictures, a collage of colourful images of art, prehispanic monuments, tradition, handicrafts and nature (Figure 2). Similar images are repeated in the link ‘Glance Mexico’ which in two pages brings together the past and the present, culture and wilderness. What was surprising in ‘Glance Mexico’ was the central image, a tall tanned blonde woman sitting on a beach, protecting herself from the sun with an umbrella (Figure 3). Strangely, this is the only representation of people in the Mexican embassy’s image of Mexico, and she is surely not Mexican. In this case the embassy has selected only a Mexico for the rich. I hope this web page is not the main source of the Mexicanness that Australians expect, as I would not be able to meet their expectations.

MIGRATING MEXICANNESSE

My experience with other migrants (living in Mexico or in Australia), especially after many years outside their countries, reminds me of what is called the aestheticisation of identities, which appears as the ‘kitsch effect’ and a proliferation of stereotypes. A common strategy of diasporic communities is to ‘make up’ the culture, as a means of interacting with others, negotiating an image that gives them importance and value, even by ‘inventing’ traditions derived from local customs or events but appropriated and transformed in the new environment. I have been impressed by houses of Mexicans who have lived outside Mexico for a long time. In one of them, where I was invited to a party, all elements of Mexicanness were on display.
There was not any doubt that it was the house of a Mexican. As I remember it this house was full of traditional objects that used to be common in Mexico. Maybe they are still used in some houses, but they are mainly stored and replaced by modern objects which fulfil similar functions (e.g. blenders instead of molcajetes, traditional stone mortars).

These items, such as cazuelas (clay pots), canastas (baskets), plaits of garlic, mazorcas (cobs of corn), cebollas de rabo (onions with long leaves), were in this house objects of decoration. The set of china we ate from was a 'set of Mexico' made of clay, and we drank tequila in typical goblets of Mexican blown glass. On the walls were some paintings in the style of Diego Rivera and Frieda Kahlo, all full of colour, hanging on white walls with blue bands, azul colonial, the same blue as was used in old Haciendas (colonial estates) or 'typically Mexican' restaurants.

I have also seen the sadness of migrants getting back to their birthplace to find that their memories have betrayed them and the culture is as alien to them as they are aliens to the people from their country. Their identity is no longer a shared identity. The culture has been changing in a way that has not been experienced by the diasporic culture. In some ways, to get back is also an experience of crossing new borders, now inside the so-called same culture. After crossing the national border, other borders are created, a border between the living culture and the mythical culture of diasporas.

After six years living in Australia with continuous trips to Mexico, my ways of representing my Mexicanness have changed in some of the directions that are reported about other diasporic identities. This is despite my conscious attempts to fight the essentialisation of my culture and its nostalgic mystification, including my use of the Internet to be in continuous contact with Mexican culture and its transformations.

My experience as described in this paper is not representative of other people’s Mexicanness, although I believe it is not so atypical. For example, one major cause of migration to Australia for Mexicans, as in my case, has been a love relationship, and this helps explain why the Mexican diasporic community in Australia has fuzzier borders than other diasporic communities. My identity outside Mexico is probably going through similar processes, developing some forms of invented and fragmented identity, not unlike the experiences of fragmentation and cultural mixing in other instances of diasporic experience, as in the US, where the biggest Mexican diaspora is. My identity in Australia has been influenced by the diasporic representation of Mexicanness here and in other countries. Even though I do not fit clearly the definition of a migrant in a diaspora, I consider my current identity a diasporic identity in process.

INVENTING MY MEXICANNESS

As a middle-class woman I grew up eating tortillas but I never made them; I ate mole but, to prepare it, usually to serve it as an offering to foreign friends, I bought a paste packed by a national or multinational business, which made it very easy to prepare. Mainly because I am an anthropologist, I sometimes dressed in Indian clothes in my youth, and decorated my house, much to the shame of my family, with handicrafts. I always liked Mexican music but I was regarded as old fashioned, part of the
minority who chose Latin American folk instead of rock and roll. I never owned or used a charro, a hat; I prefer the more practical palm hats to protect me from the sun. Even now my daughters do not forgive me for sending them on school trips with beautiful peasant hats instead of a cap, una cachucha, like all the other children. And to my shame the first time I went to hear El Grito in Mexico City, it was because my daughters were wanting to share that event with their diasporic Argentinean friends.

From this account of my connections with Mexicanness, I was a very poor Mexican, but simultaneously I was as Mexican as the majority of people in Mexico and, in comparison with some, even more so. Now, after crossing the border to leave my country and become Australian, I can see myself doing things that are reported as common tendencies of diasporic behaviour, showing off my Mexicanness. Recently for the first time in my life I made some tortillas, real tortillas of white corn I found in a shop which imports exotic products, and I prepared an ‘authentic’ mole with red dry capsicum for Australian tastes, not hot but with the same flavour as ‘chile ancho’. In my first trip back to Mexico I brought back my Indian clothes (from my anthropologist identity), which had been stored in a trunk since I was 25-years-old, used a few times in fancy dress parties. I use them now when I want to represent my new Mexican identity. In my last time living in Mexico, before I came definitively to work and live in Australia, I bought for the first time in my life a set of colourful Mexican china, de Talavera (of the type that, according to the removalist company, every Mexican from the embassy brings). I also bought an image of the Guadalupe Virgin which is hanging in my bedroom, and a Mexican flag, to wave on the day of El Grito.

I am not sure if this means crossing borders or creating borders, maybe both. The dynamics of the diasporic experience in my view imply a continuous movement of being inside and outside, of belonging and being excluded, of crossing some borders and building others. To be a Mexican outside Mexico and inside Mexican culture, it is necessary to become an expert in crossing borders and performing identities, using, transforming and inventing new identities that look ‘interesting’, ‘traditional’, ‘ethnic’, ‘authentic’, ‘aesthetic’, ‘kitsch’. These are identities which are co-constructed from the self and the other. In Australia I am more ‘authentically’ Mexican than in Mexico, and therefore my identity as diasporic Mexican is as Australian as it is Mexican.

ENDNOTES


5 *Para quien dice yo soy un malinchista y que traiciono a mi bandera y mi nación*
   Para que rompa con mi canto las fronteras les voy a abrir de par en par mi corazón.
   Deje las tumbas de mis padres, mis abuelos.
   Llegué llorando a tierra de anglosajón.
   Yo trabajaba, mis hijos iban creciendo.
   Todos nacieron bajo de esta gran nación
   Y mis derechos los han ido pisoteando, van formulando leyes de constitución
   Que haré ya viejo si me quitan mi dinero; yo sólo quiero mi seguro de pensión
   Pero que importa si soy nuevo ciudadano sigo siendo Mexicano como el pulque y el nopal
   Y mis hermanos centro y sudamericanos, caribeños o cubanos
   traen la sangre tropical para que respeten los derechos de mi raza
   Caben dos patrias en el mismo corazón
   El juez se paró en la corte la tarde del juramento
   De mi corazón brotaba una lágrima salada que me quemaba por dentro
   Dos banderas me turbaban, una verde, blanca y roja con el águila estampada
   La otra con su azul lleno de estrellas, con sus rayas rojas y blancas grabadas,
   La bandera de mis hijos que alegres me contemplaban.
   No me llamen traicionero, que a mis dos patrias las quiero
   En la mía dejé a mis muertos. Aquí mis hijos nacieron.
   Por defender mis derechos no puedo ser traicionero.


7 I use the term AmericanUS, AmericanUSAction etc. to avoid the ideological sense perceived by Latin American people as imperialism, when ‘American’ is used to refer only to the people of United States of America. Used in this way, ‘American’ excludes everyone else from the ‘American’ continent.


9 There are other dishes associated with Mexican food that come from the external construction embodied in ‘Tex Mex’ food, which multinational food chains spread globally.

10 Gómez-Peña, in Fusco, *The Border Art Workshop*.


13 The only occasion when I felt rejection of my English was in a phone interaction, which makes me think that maybe the fact that I do not look racially so different protects me from rejection, from being seen as having ‘a strong accent’.

14 http://www.homestead.com/mawai/information~ns4.html

15 http://www.homestead.com/mawai/information~ns4.html


17 Rodríguez, *Mito, identidad y rito*.

VOICES OF OUR LAND —

ETHNIC RADIO AND THE COMPLEXITY OF DIASPORIC PRACTICES IN MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA

EREZ COHEN

Media provide one of the main public forums in which diasporic communities may develop relationships with their countries of origin while constructing their locality and presence in their new place. This paper will focus on two separate local Latin American radio programs in Adelaide, Australia. The two programs illustrate the inherent tension that exists between the Australian multicultural imagery of the ‘ethnic-migrant community’ as a homogenised cultural enclave, and the complex diasporic experiences of such groups and ‘identities’.

Australian ethnic radio programs are central to the multicultural imagery and are currently also one of the main sites where the migratory locality and the relations to the homeland are performed and negotiated by migrant and other minority groups. The radio programs discussed in this paper operated from within a similar institutional setting where they were defined as ‘ethnic community radio programs’. This label helped to present the ‘community’ as a social entity which the programs were merely representing. However, a close look at the contents, performances and the actual making of the programs reveals contested views of the ‘community’ and alternative interpretations of the ‘homeland’, the ‘locality’ and the migratory experience. Despite their differences and their struggle against each other, the two programs provided their makers and their audiences with ways of interpreting the migratory movement and life in the new locality.

ETHNIC RADIO, MULTICULTURALISM AND THE ‘ETHNIC COMMUNITY’

Radio was one of the first public spheres to be transformed by the new policy of multiculturalism. The first non-English radio programs in Australia began on commercial radio as early as 1948, in response to the post-war migration. Known as LOTE, or programs in ‘languages other than English’, these programs were mainly designed to provide emergency information for migrants who could not speak English. At the time, and to a certain degree until the emergence of ‘ethnic radio’ in the mid-1970s, non-English radio programs were seen as potentially dangerous; radio, like other aspects of migrant lives, had to be closely controlled and monitored by the state.
... the government still adhered to its policy of assimilating migrants expeditiously into the general Australian population and was also fearful that politically subversive material might go undetected if broadcast in languages unknown to the authorities during the height of the Cold War. Therefore regulations were introduced in 1952, restricting these programs to the spoken word accompanied by an English translation and limited to 2.5% of a station’s programming.1

In accordance with the assimilation policy, the airwaves, like any other public space, had to be Anglo.2 It was not until 1973 that Al Grassby, the new Labor Minister for Immigration, began promoting multiculturalism and cultural plurality as an official governmental policy and lifted the broadcasting restrictions. This is what later (in 1975) led to the development of government funded ethnic broadcasting.

The establishment of government controlled ‘ethnic radio’ emerged alongside the creation of various ‘access’ community radio stations that had developed a large ethnic component, eventually broadcasting in thirty-six languages.3 This important transformation during the 1970s was largely based upon complex electoral and political processes. Such processes included the Labor party’s resolution to regain power by targeting the ‘ethnic vote’ and a political decision to publicise the benefits of Medibank to NESB communities via radio.4 Due to the previous strict state control of the media, public ethnic broadcasting was almost immediately presented as a symbol and official acknowledgment of the presence of ‘ethnics’ living in Australia.5

At a governmental level, from its inception, broadcasting in what was called ‘community languages’ was seen as the best method of familiarising immigrants with the social, economic and political workings of Australian society.6 ‘Ethnic media’, mainly in the form of radio programs, became not only an exemplary model of multiculturalism, but also one of the main public sites where migrants were ‘allowed’ to maintain and express their original cultural identities.

Currently ethnic media operate at two main levels. The first level is the national governmental radio and television channel known as the ‘Special Broadcasting Service’ — or SBS.7 The second level, which is the concern of this paper, is the media sector that takes the form of various local Ethnic Radio Stations, Community Television and access ‘ethnic radio programs’ within various non-ethnic Community Radio Stations.8

At both local and national levels, ‘ethnic media’ are often presented as one of the main ways in which different migrant groups (often defined as language — ethnic/migrant — communities) attempt to retain their original language and voice their particular cultural identity. As such, ‘ethnic media’ are often celebrated and presented as one of the major expressions of multiculturalism and as contributors to social harmony and tolerance in Australia. Like other ‘cultural spaces’ constructed by official multiculturalism ‘ethnic radio-programs’ (and for that matter ‘Ethnic Radio Stations’) are depicted as ‘cultural’ sites that provide ‘migrants’ with a tolerable harmonious setting, and the possibility of maintaining culture and voicing their otherness. Accordingly, ethnic radio programs are
categorised as cultural expressions of enriching/tolerated ‘migrant communities’ and are framed as ‘the many voices of one Australia’, a single inclusive multicultural nation.9

Yet, the ambiguity of such ‘migrant communities’ and the way in which the category ‘ethnic media’ and specific ‘ethnic programs’ construct the ‘community’ that they were assumed to represent was totally ignored. While the relationships between the ‘community’ and its radio programs were often misunderstood by policy makers, this was not the case for the ‘ethnics’ themselves who realised the importance of such media, not only in representing a given ‘community’ but also in constructing and promoting a particular understanding of the ‘community’. Furthermore, in contrast to seeing the radio program as only about ‘locality’, the programs were also regarded as important in managing and expressing particular relationships with the homelands.

‘ETHNIC MEDIA’ AS DIASPORIC PRACTICE

The central role played by the electronic media in the construction of diasporic identities has largely been overlooked in anthropological literature on migration and ethnic communities in Australia.10 Appearing together on the dial of an ‘ethnic radio station’ (or as ‘access’ programs on non-ethnic community radio stations), the ‘ethnic’ programs are constructed as ‘a service to our multicultural communities’. Yet, in a very interesting and profound way, such programs operate as diasporic sites, whereby the notion and the experience of the ‘community’ and ‘identity’ are produced and negotiated. Furthermore, it is the diasporic character of such ‘communities’, their negotiation and relation with ‘elsewhere’ (within the setting of the new ‘place’) which make such media networks extremely important. ‘Ethnic media’, far from being a mere expression of the multicultural nation, should be regarded as ‘particularistic media’ which, in contrast to the ‘majority media’, are reconstructing or maintaining ‘fragile or imperilled communities — minority groups, migrants, exile and diasporas’.11

Instead of being unproblematic — given, merely ‘factual’ — diaspora is always an intellectual construction tied to a given narrative. Like other types of communities, but more so than most, diasporas are incarnations of existing discourses, interpretants of such discourses, echoes or anticipations of historical projects. They are ‘imagined communities’ par excellence, and they can be imagined in a number of possible, sometimes conflicting ways. Thus their maintenance, far from being a technical problem, involves a constant activity of reinvention.12

The term diaspora is important in this context, as it emphasises attachments to another place. The diasporic experience is one that revolves around the dialectic of ‘home and away’. It is clear, however, that the diaspora is not only about movement and transnationality. In a sense, as Clifford (1997) argues, diaspora is always about the locality. It is a cultural form which, through deploying transnational networks, tries to accommodate as well as resist the host countries:
Diaspora is different from travel (though it works through travel practices) in that it is not temporary. It involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home.13

The experience of the locality is therefore embodied within the complex relations that migrants maintain with their families, local communities and the nation-states from which migration took place.

Ethnic radio programs’ cultural and social importance for the producers and their audiences illustrate a set of complex diasporic practices which relate to multiple forms of symbolic attachments to the homelands. Such a perspective challenges any simplistic view of migrants (or ‘ethnics’) as people who ‘naturally’ belong to a homogenised local ‘ethnic/migrant community’, or as members of some original national imagined community ‘back home’. In order to understand the complexity of the term ‘community’, it is necessary to look carefully at the various processes and cultural practices by which migrants and their cultural brokers evoke the ‘elsewhere’ as they produce meanings and reconstruct their life ‘here’ in Australia. Such relations and networks were amongst the issues that I looked at when I conducted an ethnographic study of Latin American immigrants in Adelaide.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

Ethnographically, I had the opportunity to take part in the development of Voces de Nuestra Tierra (Voces) and the El programa Radial Salvadoreño (The Salvadorean Radio Program), almost from the moment they began operating during 1997 and 1998. The two programs were not part of the local Ethnic Radio Station, SEBI, which runs a weekly one-hour Latin American Program. Rather, both operated under the category of ‘access programs for NESB migrants’ at two local non-ethnic community radio stations, which operate as part of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA).

These two programs, like other community radio programs, were organised and run by volunteers. Both programs’ organisers and participants were mostly active members of various social organisations and communal activities. In order to work in radio, they were trained locally by the radio stations as part of the Australian Ethnic Radio Training Project (AERTP). Both Voces and the Salvadorean Radio Program were locally produced and broadcast live for one hour a week. They were both funded by their audiences and by ‘ethnic program grants’ given directly to the stations by the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF).14 While officially operating under the regulation of the CBF, in reality the programs were self-controlled and were not closely regulated or monitored. Decisions about what and what not to broadcast were mostly in the hands of the participants. Broadcasting in Spanish meant that the programs were also free from close supervision by the station that would normally interfere only in the case of an official complaint.

Community radio stations cannot afford to monitor audiences like commercial radio stations do. Public funding and some governmental support means that they don’t need to constantly try and access large parts of the population. This, however, does not mean that community radio stations are
financially secure, far from it. The stations constantly need to search for funds and get the financial support of their listeners. One source of revenue comes from fees paid by access programs like the ones I am describing in this paper. For these reasons, however, it is sensible to argue that community programs will generally tend to reflect the ideas and feelings of the volunteers rather than those of the ‘community’ they service. An access ‘ethnic program’ is somehow different from other community programs mainly because its audience is believed to be less ‘abstract’ and more identifiable. In other words, the audience is assumed to be a ‘community’ prior to the establishment of the program.

As part of my ethnographic research and in challenging such an assumption, I was interested in studying the process by which an ‘audience’ is turned into a ‘community’. At the same time, given the nature of such media, my research looked mainly at the organisers of the programs, and the programs that they produced. As such I looked mainly at the way the audience was imagined and constructed by the programs, rather than at the ‘real’ audiences and the ways that they perceived these programs. As a participant observer of both programs I was interested in finding out why and how the programs operated. I looked at the ways in which decisions about what to broadcast and what was newsworthy were made. In particular, I was interested in the radio programs as ‘cultural performances’ in which particular interpretations of the ‘community’ and the countries of origin were performed.

_Voces de Nuestra Tierra_ and the Salvadorean Program related differently to the country (or countries) of origin in selecting particular news and musical items to be broadcast. Yet they also differed from each other in the ways in which such connections were expressed or performed in the programs and the ways in which such representations related to particular social relations. Furthermore, the two programs provided alternative understandings of the generic ‘Latin American’ categorisation. It was the programs’ ambivalent positions toward the generic category ‘Latino/Latin American’, as a marker of their collective diasporic ‘identity’ and of the local ‘ethnic community’, that placed the two programs in opposition to each other.

**VOCES DE NUESTRA TIERRA: AN ELECTRONIC HOME AWAY FROM HOME**

_Voces de Nuestra Tierra_ began to broadcast during 1997 as an alternative program to the Latin American Program that operated weekly on 5EBI, the only local Ethnic Community Radio station in Adelaide. The initiative for a new community program came from the Federation of Spanish Speaking Communities of South Australia, an umbrella ethnic organisation that aimed to represent the various Latin American organisations and nationalities in Adelaide.

The established Latin American Program on 5EBI broadcasted for one hour a week, it played popular Latin American music, personal greetings (_saludos_) and provided information about different social activities and various organisations. Yet, in its attempt to represent the ‘Latin American community’ _in total_, the program avoided broadcasting news items (from Latin America and from Australia) and did not play any ‘controversial’ musical items
(e.g. political or protest music). In a way, the Latin American Program adopted a ‘neutral’ position, one that provided access for various individuals and organisations that wished to publicise a particular social activity, but at the same time it refused any further involvement with any particular group or organisation in the making of the program.

This is not to say that the Latin American Program ignored, or was not influenced by its audience, rather it seems that the operator of the program decided, for her own practical reasons, to avoid affiliation with any specific group within the ‘community’. Such a strategy was the only way she felt she could represent the entire ‘community’ which she perceived, like many other Latin American migrants, to be highly divided. As a result, the program was usually referred to by many Latin Americans as ‘Claudia’s program’, the name of the presenter, and not by its official name nor even as ‘our’ program.

Like the Latin American program, the Federation had claim over the ‘community’, and the various organisations that it represented felt that they had no influence on the format and content (musical and otherwise) of the existing Latin American Program. Part of the problem was that this particular program predated the arrival of most of the Salvadoreans and many other migrants and refugees who now saw themselves as being part of the ‘Latin American community’.

This was the general background which led to the establishment of Voces de Nuestra Tierra. In its declaration of principles the new radio program presented itself in the following manner:

Este programa radial nace como un medio de difusión alternativo y complementario, a los ya existentes en la comunidad de habla hispana, con el propósito de abarcar temas de contenido cultural, social e histórico para así poder profundizar y compartir la riqueza de valores de nuestro pueblos, brindando, a la vez, un espacio a aquellos nuevos talentos que vitalizan y perpetuan el canto, poesía y toda arte de nuestras raíces indígenas y populares.

(This Radio program is born as an alternative and complementary means of dissemination to the existing programs for the Spanish speaking community. It proposes promoting cultural, social and historical themes in order to promote and share the richness of the values of our people. It also offers a space for new talents that vitalise and perpetuate through song, poetry and other art forms, our popular and indigenous roots.)

In accordance with the reference to ‘Spanish speaking communities’ in the Federation’s name, the new program also defined its audience as consisting of a particular ‘language community’. Due to the fact that the program was initially organised by people from various nationalities and as a representation of these various nationalities, its name in Spanish did not allude to any specific cultural, national group (‘voices of our land’). The reference to ‘our land’ was inclusive of all ‘Latin Americans’ and the program deliberately avoided its identification with any single ‘national’ identity.

As outlined in its declaration of principles, Voces regarded itself as an alternative to the existing Spanish language programs. Being an alternative program implied, according to some of the organisers, that Voces would adopt
critical and political views regarding the situation in South and Central America. According to these organisers, such a political position was not provided by any of the other programs in Spanish, including the national SBS programs.

Some of the volunteers on the original team who had initiated the program were political refugees, who had been members of left-wing opposition groups in Chile and shared similar experiences of persecution and torture by the regime. As such they saw the importance of the program in promoting issues such as human rights abuses in Latin America, the situation in Cuba, the struggle against US global capitalism and the commemoration of important political events, such as the military coup in Chile or the Cuban revolution. Those who were opposed to these political aspects of the program were mainly Salvadoreans and other Latin Americans who did not share the same political views and had had totally different personal and collective histories from those of the Chilean political refugees.

As soon as Voces began to operate the political commitment became a source of tension amongst its various organisers. Arguments were conducted about every musical item that was chosen, as well as about the form and content of the program. Due to the ‘political’ tension surrounding the content and the meanings of the program, the division was soon interpreted as a conflict between the ‘Chilean’ and the ‘Salvadorean’ organisers. Yet, the struggle within the program was not only about different political views. The opposition was not directed towards ‘left’ politics as such, but rather against the relevance of such politics in the setting of a local community program. The main argument of the Salvadorean opponents was that the political aspect of the program portrayed a particular Chilean point of view and history that did not represent or speak to the larger community. What led to a total breakdown in communication was the way the Chilean political refugees, defined derogatorily by their opponents, as los politicos, interpreted such accusations as attempts to silence them by undermining their political commitment and as censorship of the program.

Roberto, one of the Chilean organisers, told me about some of these conflicts that had happened shortly prior to my arrival and participation in the program:

When we began broadcasting there was this Argentinian woman who wanted to join us and be part of the program, I don’t think that you know her. Anyway I wanted to play a song by Mercedes Sosa and she said that she hates this music and that I should not play it. She was saying that in Argentina everyone hates Mercedes Sosa because everybody knows that she is a communist. Can you believe it? With the Salvadoreans we had different sorts of arguments, they only wanted to play Cumbia and Merengue, and there was this one person who wanted us to read the weather report from El Salvador. I thought that this was ridiculous, why speak about the weather in El Salvador when you are living in Adelaide? They [the Salvadoreans] wanted us to read news from El Salvador and to do it with a Salvadorean accent.

On the other hand when I spoke to Eduardo, one of the Salvadoreans who left Voces shortly after it began broadcasting, he argued that the problem was that the Chileans forcibly took over
the program that was supposed to be inclusive of all the community:

These Chileans are really ‘sinvergüenzas’ (dishonest, shameless). They did not want us to play our music and literally took over the program. Who wants to hear their old political music anyhow? We need our own program as Salvadoreans because we cannot work with these Chileans. And anyway they are so divided. We have some divisions amongst ourselves but not like them. It is just that we are from two different cultures. Maybe they will tell you that the Salvadoreans took over the Federation but this is because when they controlled it they only looked after themselves.

It is important to note that such tensions and conflicts were rarely expressed openly. Instead of open confrontations, the conflict worked more at the level of gossip amongst networks of groups and individuals. This is what made such tensions much harder to resolve and they usually led to further divisions. As the ‘Salvadoreans’ gained control of the Federation and left the program, Voces declared itself to be an independent radio program, and came to be known amongst other Latinos, though not by the organisers, as the ‘Chilean program’.

Clearly, this conflict needs to be understood in the context of the way many of these migrants and refugees had experienced the media (and politics) in their own countries. Especially where the media was used by the military regimes across Latin America to impose a ‘truth’ which no one could challenge. It was in this context that Mario, one of the Chilean political refugees who ran the program, argued that the importance of this local broadcast was not to represent the local community, but rather to bring ‘alternative’ information to listeners in Chile who could tune in to the program via the Internet. In an interesting diasporic twist, the migratory ‘voices of our land’ had become ‘voices for our land’. The program was now seen as a means to be heard, not only in the ‘new’ (multicultural) locality, but also as a way to participate in, and be part of the ‘original’ culture, and its political space ‘back home’.17

As Eduardo, one of the Salvadoreans who had left the program after the initial conflict remarked:

Voces are broadcasting to a fictitious community, they don’t even know who is listening to them. I listened yesterday to the program and they talked for 10 minutes about Pinochet. For them the word ‘community’ is just a word, nothing more, because they are not part of the community.

Such statements need to be understood in relation to the political and symbolic struggle to represent the ‘community’. What the Salvadorean speaker challenged is the legitimacy of Voces to talk from a position of the ‘community’ as an authorised ‘voice’ of, and for the ‘community’. The people of Voces, from the perspective of their opponents, forcefully took control of what was supposed to be a ‘community’ program. In Bourdieu’s terms, they gained control of an authorised space from where they spoke as if they were the ‘community’. As ‘Chileans’ and as political refugees the people in Voces denied access to Eduardo, the Salvadorean player who struggled to gain entry into a social position from which he, as a ‘Salvadorean’ (and from his perspective a ‘real’ member of the ‘community’), wanted to speak in the name of the ‘community’.

The remark about the listeners in
Chile as the ‘true’ audience of the program was partly made in defence of the crisis of legitimation (to speak as a community) faced by the ‘political’ organisers of Voces who decided to break away from the Federation. At the same time, it also indicates how the uses of new technologies challenge the imagery of the ‘community’ and its social networks as something that is necessarily bound to a particular geographical locality or a localised ‘ethnic community’. An ethnic radio program that claims it has listeners in Chile testifies not only to the political commitment of the Chilean refugees who produce it, but it also reveals their diasporic motivation in making it. The paradox of ‘being an alternative’ for listeners in Chile lies in the way in which the radio program itself used the Internet to download ‘alternative’ information from Chile and elsewhere. In fact, the Internet played an important role in the program making, as it facilitated the gathering of specific information that suited the organisers’ political views and interests. Punto Final, for example, a left-wing Chilean newspaper, as well as other alternative news services, was preferable to mainstream newspapers which were regarded as governmental propaganda.

The team that ran the program at this stage consisted of two young women (one Chilean and one Mexican) and three men, all Chilean. The Chilean men, and to a certain degree the Chilean woman, shared similar political beliefs as well as personal histories of political persecution in Chile. Whilst the Mexican woman could identify with some of the political views expressed by the others, she was of a different nationality and saw herself mainly as a migrant rather than a political refugee. As such she often felt that she was not really part of the group and had very little influence on the content or presentation style of the program. The two women at the program were also younger than the men which added another dimension to their position within the team.

Due to that initial conflict and the fact that the people who remained in the program shared similar political beliefs and had similar personal histories, there were no further discussions (or conflicts) about issues the program should promote or express. An understanding emerged of what was important or appropriate for broadcasting and a particular presentation style and a distinctive musical content was adopted. The decisions that had to be taken (for example, which texts to read) were normally made shortly before each program. Each person prepared a particular section of the program (the news, the community announcements etc.), and shortly before they began broadcasting they sat together and quickly showed each other what they had brought, usually without any debate or disagreement. There were, however, subtle ways of influencing the program, such as adopting a different presentation style, bringing a CD to be played or by selecting a particular text to be read. These ‘quiet’ negotiations shaped the content and the presentation style of the program.

As with other radio programs, the process of broadcasting alternated between the ‘off-air’ sections, in which music was played, and the ‘on-air’ in which the mikes were open. Alternating between the musical items, the ‘on air’ sections were comprised of:

1) the Theme of the day, usually a text concerning current political developments in Latin America;
2) Cultural Theme, which included general subjects regarding a set of
ideas or a particular point of view—taken from the opinion section of various Latin American newspapers;
3) **Latin American News** section referring to different countries in Latin America; and,
4) a section of **Community Announcements** where information about different social activities and local organisations was read and various governmental and non-governmental services were promoted.

In some cases, short news items about Australia, mainly political news, were translated and read during the program under the category **Australian News**. On rare occasions an interview was conducted in the studio, normally with a promoter of a particular social activity or a special guest.

This particular structure led the presenters into a style of presentation that minimised any personal commentary or informal conversational style when on-air. The texts, taken from various internet sites, were often read as they were written without any form of editing or rewriting or adding of personal commentary. There was also a deliberate decision taken, to avoid any commentary or further reference to local social events, so as to clearly differentiate this program from the other local Latin American radio programs. Sports, fiestas, religious celebrations and even political activities (apart from announcing the dates and locations) were never talked about on the program. While it is hard to say exactly why this ‘formal’ style of presentation was adopted, it seems that it was partly related to the notion that the program was an alternative voice to the existing local radio program. The ‘seriousness’ of the program was achieved not only via the ‘important content’, that is, the ‘political’ and ‘serious’ texts and music that were presented, but also in the ‘performance’ itself. In other words, to be an ‘alternative’ program meant, amongst other things, avoiding the ‘fun’ image of ‘Latin American’ culture and music.

More than the articles that were read during the program, it was the music that symbolised the political identity of Voces. The preference was towards protest music, or what is known in Chile and across Latin America as the ‘new song’ or *nueva canción*. As Prirad, who studied this musical movement, explains:

> The *nueva canción* is a living reflection of the world it comes from; it bears all the wounds of the struggle for the social and economic emancipation of Latin America, as well as its hopes, its doubts and its victories. Because of this it does not need anyone to tell it what it has to do. Its commitment is a spontaneous one and it becomes part of the history of the people to the extent that it assumes the role that the people assign to it. Sometimes it serves the purpose of a political tract and its only value is to have acted as witness to the moment that gave it birth; at times it simply repeats old songs from the past, while at others it rises to high levels and becomes the universal expression of the blossoming of the Latin American soul, to remain, like all true art, part of the innate consciousness of the people.¹⁹

The ‘new song’ came to be known across Latin America as *canciones de lucha* (songs of struggle).²⁰ La canción es también *un arma de la revolución* — ‘The song is also a weapon of the revolution’ — as it came to be known in Chile and other parts of Latin America. For the organisers of
the program the act of broadcasting this sort of music in Adelaide was seen as a continuation of the role this music had played in Latin America. As Mario, one of the volunteers in the program explains:

*The music is very important for me. It is an educational tool. You can pass a message by using a song, to teach something. There is a Sandinista song that tells you how to build and use weapons; this is one way a song can teach people how to fight and change things. I like Latin American bands that use their music in order to protest and try to improve things. The music in our program needs to reflect the difficult social realities in Latin America, the drugs, crime and poverty. Some people don’t like it, they say that I only show the bad things in Latin America and that I never talk about the good things, but this is the reality and this music reflects it. To play only happy music is senseless especially when there are real problems.*

The organisers regarded the broadcast of this music in *Voces* as promoting a pan-national Latin American identity. According to Mario, this particular music was not familiar outside the continent, where ‘Latin American music’ is often identified merely as dance music. ‘People need to know that Latin music is not only Salsa and Merengue’, as he explained. Such a statement totally ignores the heavily political message within *salsa* music. Yet, it is possible that for Mario, being a Chilean political refugee, the revolutionary messages of the *nueva canción* were considered ‘truly’ political in contrast to the social commentary in US Latin *salsa* music.

Publicly playing such ‘political’ music in the context of migration is clearly more than a political statement. The possession of significant cultural objects from ‘home’, and their presentation in the new locality helps generate a sense of a ‘homely’ feeling in the new place. It is based on ‘a desire to promote the feeling of being there here’. However, the ‘political’ aspect of the program was never discussed or expressed openly ‘on-air’. Apart from the reference to being ‘alternative’, *Voces* never declared openly any political affiliation. Such an ambiguity, as one of my other informants told me, was a common practice adopted by the opposition forces in Chile in order to avoid arrest, torture and elimination under the military regime. Some Chileans talked about the need to hide your ‘political’ identification in Adelaide, as a way of avoiding ‘burning’ yourself within the ‘community’. Others claimed that the military regime had previously sent agents to locate political enemies abroad, including in Australia. While these claims are possible, it is interesting to note that at present such ‘secrecy’ was based more on the polarisation of the Chilean society during the 1970s and the 1980s, than on a fear of political persecution in Australia or in Chile.

This type of political positioning generated further criticism by the opponents of the program as it contradicted *Voces*’s claim to be an inclusive ‘community’ program. Some even regarded the program’s slogan — ‘*Voces de Nuestra Tierra — Cada Miércoles, la primera a la izquierda del dial*’ — ‘Voices of our land — every Wednesday, on the left side of your dial’, as evidence of the program’s hidden political identification. *Voces de Nuestra Tierra*, as an alternative program, rejected the idea of
being representative, yet by making the program and by being recognised by the radio station as representatives of an ‘ethnic community’, it still had a claim to be speaking for the ‘community’. At the same time the program adopted a very critical position towards the people that it was supposedly representing. Voces refused to be part of or express ‘fun’ — Latino culture and memories. This aspect, while appreciated by some, was seen by others as evidence of the program’s arrogance. This is how Rodrigo, a Chilean migrant who was not involved in the making of the program, described it:

I thought that Voces de Nuestra Tierra, was innovative, but that doesn’t mean it was a good program. They were just starting out and realistically the development of any project takes a long time, it should be considered as an experimental stage, but if a program is representing a community it should represent the community, not think itself above the community which is what Voces de Nuestra Tierra thought of itself. Voces de Nuestra Tierra wasn’t natural, they were ‘try hards’, but I am biased, you know, because I know these people; they get caught up in unresolved passions. Try hard intellectuals I call them.

The program and its organisers occupied a marginal position in relation to what they saw as the rest of the ‘community’. Yet it was a position which, from their perspective and in contrast to the other radio programs and social organisations, represented the ‘true’ Latin American identity and history. Being ‘political’, even if this was not openly stated, was to represent the ‘real’ Latin America. As Mario explains:

I hate it when people call me ‘polítpico’ not because I don’t like the term but because I think it is important to be political. Because of such stupidity, when I first came here, other Chileans warned me not to deal with politics, they told me that it is dangerous. There was a real social pressure not to speak about politics because some were really afraid that if they did they would be sent back to Chile. They call us ‘politicos’ but they forget that they are all here because of political persecution. For some people everything you say is politics. Is it being political to talk against Pauline Hanson? I cannot understand it. We are lucky that at the moment, here in Australia, it is not yet dangerous to say what you really think.

As we can see, the position of being ‘political’ and of ‘speaking the truth’ needs to be understood not only in the historical and political context of Chile, but also in the migratory anxiety of ‘change’ and the fear of forgetting or losing one’s original identity. The radio program and the ‘alternative’ music in Voces operated as a boundary marker between the ‘non-political’ and the ‘political’ Chileans (and other Latin Americans) without ever stating clearly such a position.

While such struggles can be regarded as a continuation of the political struggle in Latin America, it is important to note that to a certain degree it is a product of the definition of the ‘Latin Americans’ as members of a local ‘ethnic/migrant community’ in Australia. In other words, the struggle is not only about the ‘representations’ of the ‘past’ (in Chile or in Latin America) or the ‘present’ (of the local community). Rather it is a struggle about entering an authorised position which is very much a product of official multiculturalism.

For the volunteers, however, the actual making of the program was more than just a mere claim to represent the
‘community’. For the participants in the studio, Voces operated as a migratory gathering and as a ‘nostalgic’ cultural performance of their identities. Clearly, the term ‘nostalgic’ cannot be understood simply as something of the past, which undermines the symbolic power of the program, but rather as something that ‘embeds the past in the present in a dynamic way’.\(^23\) The program worked as symbolic acknowledgement of the continued attachments with the homeland. By playing ‘political’ music, and singing along with the songs (off-air), by reading ‘alternative’ news articles and by broadcasting other important ‘voices’ from the past, the participants utilised the program as a weekly ritual. Voces became another form of migratory gathering that enabled the organisers (and perhaps their audience) to re-live important events from their personal and collective memory and current life in their homelands.

As a cultural performance, Voces worked to transplant the memories of the homeland into the particular present. One such interesting example was a special program that was produced for the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the military coup in Chile. This traumatic event was captured for many Chileans by the last speech of president Salvador Allende.\(^24\) Radio Magallanes, a governmental Chilean radio station in Santiago, transmitted this historic speech on 11 September 1973, as the armed forces began bombarding the presidential palace at La Moneda. Taking into account the stress and the fears felt during the first hours of the military coup such a transmission was one of those media events that become inscribed in the collective memory; ‘everybody was glued to the radio that day’ as one Chilean recalled. By replaying the voice and last words of the dead president, Voces worked as a commemorative ritual. It enabled the reliving of an event that symbolised the destruction of the dream of a ‘peaceful road to socialism’ and the years of terror and torture that followed.\(^25\)

In the context of migration such ‘voices’ are often related to an imaginary space of the original ‘home’. Like listening to the taped message of the relatives sent with the recent arrival to Sydney, the voice operates as a conduit to the imaginary world of the homeland (as ‘back home’) ... The voice operates as an imagined metonymy, in the sense that it is metonymic of a totality that does not and has never existed, but which is imagined as a homely totality from the standpoint of the present.\(^26\)

Clearly, the emotional effect of such a public broadcast is very powerful, as for some, it brings back not only memories of the ‘original’ home but also the stressful and traumatic moments of the military coup. Yet, even at such a dramatic moment for the participants who had been persecuted and victimised by the regime, there was no room for any ‘on-air’ personal comments. It was as if the ‘personal’ could not and should not be part of the ‘political’. In a way, being politically committed from ‘here’ reminded the participants that they were no longer ‘there’. The participants never articulated such a contradiction, which could undermine their effort to see themselves as relevant to the political struggle ‘back home’; it was mainly their opponents who, by ridiculing the políticos, talked about those who are ‘revolutionaries’ from afar.

As a form of cultural performance, Voces was both about migratory memory
and the present. In its musical and ‘political’ content Voces was saying, ‘We are still the same’ even when we are here; despite the distance ‘we are part of what is going on over there’. From the organisers’ perspective the program was not regarded as ‘nostalgic’ or of ‘the past’ because it was about being Chilean, Latin American and revolutionary. Yet because of these aspects some Latin American migrants who had different personal histories and political identities to the organisers criticised the program as being non-representative or irrelevant to the local community. As Joaquín, a Chilean migrant who disliked the program explains:

_The music that they play is not interesting and the weekly themes are always very political, and many Chileans here just don’t like it. Instead of playing popular music they put on these old songs and they always have to be political songs. They should talk about the situation in Chile today and not about what happened there in Pinochet’s time. They think that their political position sounds good but the reality is that it is not representative of the way people think here. I think they find it hard to understand that there are many Chileans who are just not interested to hear about what happened in Chile. These Chileans live now in Australia and this is what interests them and if they show any interest in Chile it is not about what happened there in the past but about what is happening there today. The people at Voces cannot understand that most Chileans here don’t want to be part of a Chilean Ghetto. The problem is that they are doing this program for themselves and not for the community. If they want to be more relevant they need to go and talk to the people, they need to be part of the community and speak about things that happen here and not to live in the past._

It is important to note that the program’s contact with its audience was minimal. The phone was hardly ever used during the programs and listeners rarely rang the station during the broadcast. The organisers of Voces did talk at times about the need to do something about this, and often joked about an imaginary single listener who never misses a program, but nothing eventuated.

This is not to say that the program had no listeners at all, but that, in a way, the audience was not very important to the organisers. In a similar manner to a clandestine radio station, the political message, and the desire for being ‘political’ in making the program, was more significant than trying to locate the listeners or make them interact with the program.

The social marginalisation of the organisers and the program’s alienation from the local ‘community’, amongst other things, were what eventually led to its downfall. Due to the funding system it is essential for such radio programs to find some method of collecting money from their audiences (the grant covered only half the costs). Other programs relied on donations collected in ‘radiothons’ (normally run by the station and not by a particular program), sponsors and fundraising fiestas. The program managed to collect some funding towards its bill by organising barbecues for supporters and family members and by promoting a few local Latin American businesses as the program sponsors. Yet, after not paying their fees for several months and after the station decided to shift all its ‘ethnic’ programs to different broadcasting times, Voces was kindly advised to sort out its financial situation before it could go on-air again. In other words, the radio station eventually shut
down the program. In total, Voces had operated for two years.

THE SALVADOREEN PROGRAM

The Salvadorean Program began operating in mid-1998 as an alternative to Voces. The same Salvadorean migrants who had initially helped organise Voces, as members of the Federation, and who felt that this original program had been ‘taken over’ by the ‘political’ Chileans, were now organising the new radio program. From its inception, however, the new team decided to try and access large parts of the ‘community’ and therefore deliberately avoided any divisive political or religious themes. After their experiences on Voces, the organisers defined the new program as ‘Salvadorean’ and the ‘community’ they represented as the ‘Salvadorean community’ and not as ‘Latin American’. This narrow national definition was made deliberately in order to deny access to non-Salvadoreans who might have wished to join the program. Yet, almost from the moment the program began operating, the idea was to try and be inclusive of other ‘Latin Americans’. As Roberto, one of the organisers and a Salvadorean ‘community leader’ explains:

_The other radio program (Voces) was too political. They were also too Chilean, they never talked about other countries in Latin America. Our Salvadorean Program is not only for El Salvadoreans, we also bring news from other countries in Latin America as well as other parts of the world. We are now organising the rules of the program. Our goal is to create commitment to the program. As the director of the program my goal is to eventually make it a program for all the Spanish speakers here in Adelaide. We want to invite people from different organisations such as the Chilean Club or the Latin American Club. We want to use the program in order to create a community. We have to find out who is listening to our program. We already have some indication from the people who ring us and send us letters. We know for example, that we also have some Chilean listeners. We prepared a questionnaire in order to find out what the people want to hear and what they think about our program._

This statement indicates that in a way the Salvadorean Program was also established in opposition to the existing Latin American Program, and not just as an alternative to Voces. The same original motivation for challenging the Latin American Program, that led to the establishment of Voces, was also what motivated the making of the new program.

The demand to avoid politics and religion was presented to the organisers by the station manager as part of the funding regulations of the Community Broadcast Foundation (CBF). This restriction was not seriously explained nor even closely regulated yet it was interpreted by the organisers as a demand to completely avoid any reference to religion and Australian or Latin American politics. This demand suited the desire expressed by the organisers to represent the entire ‘community’. As Laura, one of the participants and organisers of the program, explained:

_Some people in our community are from the right, others are from the left. The only way to overcome that gap is to avoid it altogether and not to take any political sides in our program. The program has to be a program for everyone – we should be like one big_
family for the sake of our children.

Yet the formal definition of the radio program as Salvadorean and not as ‘Latin American’ (or for that matter ‘Spanish speaking’) was immediately criticised by non-Salvadorean Latinos as creating further divisions in the ‘community’. The people from Voces and some members of the Federation, who worked to construct an inclusive notion of a ‘Latin American community’, saw such an expression as exclusive and divisive. As Silvina, a Chilean and a member at the Federation, explains:

I listened to their program when I heard that they called themselves the Salvadorean Program and when they played the Salvadorean national anthem I decided to turn my radio off. This was not a program for me. It is like in the book of Galeano who said that even if we all speak Spanish, Latin America will never be united. In my opinion they chose to break away from the Latin American community and to separate themselves from other migrants.

Such a criticism is similar to the way Voces was accused of usurping the position of speaking as the ‘community’. In this case, as in the previous one, such an accusation is part of the struggle over the symbolic definitions of ‘community’ that is carried on within the construction of a local ‘Latin American community’ which is supposedly above any particular national (or political) identities. A member of the Federation and a non-Salvadorean ‘community leader’ told me that he would never speak on a radio program that defines itself as ‘Salvadorean’ because in principle he opposes any organisation or social group that chooses to define itself according to a narrow national basis.

The organisers of the program, however, claimed that while the program is a Salvadorean Program, other Latinos were always welcome to participate, at least in promoting their cultural and social events. In a way the organisers chose to narrow their ‘definition’ of the ‘community’ (and the program) to its ‘national’ context to avoid the criticism Voces encountered in presenting itself as a ‘Latin American’ program. Being openly defined as a ‘national’ program meant that the organisers, as Salvadoreans, saw and defined themselves as one section of the ‘Latin American community’. To a certain degree the narrow ‘national’ definition was deliberately chosen and vigorously guarded in order to avoid (after the experience in Voces) possible struggles over the program’s definition and its musical and cultural content with other (national, political, religious) groupings within the category of the ‘Latin American community’.

An important aspect of the difference between Voces and the Salvadorean Program was in the distinct ‘Salvadorean’ experience of living a sense of a ‘community’. Due to the hardship of life in El Salvador and its brutal 12-years civil war between 1980 and 1992, many Salvadoreans came as refugees to Australia accompanied by their extended families. Furthermore, most Salvadoreans tend to live in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. As such many of the Salvadoreans in Adelaide are actually related to each other, know each other from El Salvador and meet almost on a daily basis at their local shopping centres. These aspects resulted in the ‘Salvadoreans’ developing a sense of a local neighbourhood which most other
Latinos do not have. Another important factor that contributes to their sense of a particular Salvadorean identity was the feeling that the Chileans often discriminated against them and treated them as inferiors.

The radio program adopted particular Salvadorean markers of identity. This was evident in the way it was framed. The program usually opened with the traditional sounds of the Carbonero, a type of folkloric Salvadorean music played on the Marimba, and closed with the national anthem of El Salvador. Like Voces, the program was promoted and explained as a means of educating and maintaining ‘cultural identity’. Such a definition was not a direct result of the ways in which official multiculturalism defines ‘culture’ and the ‘community’ but more a product of the migratory anxiety of living in a different culture where there is a need to ‘keep the culture alive’.29 As Roberto from the Salvadorean Program explains:

Many people do not know our culture. Even people from El Salvador who came here do not know our culture. We need to educate them. Our program is about culture, music, and information about our country, about our history and our forefathers. It is not only for the young but also for the adults who will have the opportunity to learn more about their culture.

It is important to note that the Salvadorean Program operated very differently to Voces. Besides being there for the program itself, the team of broadcasters met at other times, almost on a weekly basis, to prepare the texts to be read and discuss different issues regarding the program’s content and formation. Such meetings, even when the decisions discussed were not fully implemented, made the program more of a collective effort than Voces ever was. These conversations, training sessions and even rehearsals of the performance (in reading aloud and editing the texts before the program) helped to establish particular meanings and ideas that the program promoted.

In contrast to Voces, the Salvadorean Program set out immediately to involve its audience in the program. One of the most important aspects of the program was the broadcasting of saludos (greetings) to friends and family members. The saludos gave the program a form and means to communicate directly with its audience who, by requesting a particular song to be played, often influenced the musical content of the program. The ‘saludos’ also worked to communicate important social information in a direct or subtle manner. When a man, for example, asked for a very sad and romantic song to be played for his wife, it was immediately assumed that they must have had a fight.

As I became more involved in the radio program and the ‘community’, I also became part of the saludos system. I once, however, experienced personally the vicious side of the saludos when, as a joke, one of the presenters improvised such a saludo directed to me and gave it a romantic hint (a very, very, very warm greeting to Erez from ... ). After the program ended the woman who sent me the saludo called my home crying, telling me that her father had heard the program and was very upset, as it sounded as if we were having an affair. The interesting aspect of this story is the way even the most innocent saludos were decoded and interpreted as carrying social knowledge and at times had real social consequences.
The saludos and the way the program was constructed and addressed its audience as a ‘community’ made it into a virtual public meeting place of various family members and friends. In more than one sense, the saludos marked and recreated the different social networks and boundaries of a ‘community’ as it was experienced for these individuals and social groups. Many of the programs, for example, opened with saludos to particular families and individuals whom the presenters knew and presented as ‘listeners’ or as members of the ‘Salvadoran community’ even if there was no particular request for such saludos.

Like Voces, the program provided a news section but, in contrast, the news focused mainly on El Salvador and avoided any political criticism. In a way, the program was simulating radio programs from El Salvador by broadcasting the ‘National News’ (from El Salvador) as well as ‘Departmental News’ from different regional zones within El Salvador.

However, by presenting El Salvador in such a way the presenters were criticised by some other El Salvadoreans. The argument made by several people was that by reading the official newspaper from El Salvador, El Diario de Hoy, the program was already being ‘political’ and voluntarily broadcasting governmental propaganda material. While Voces was criticised for not representing the entire ‘community’ and for being politically biased, the Salvadoran Program was criticised for presenting El Salvador in an idealised way that avoided mentioning, criticising or explaining the harsh realities of life there.

The program evoked the images and rhetoric of the national ‘imagined community’ as the basis of the ‘community’ life in Adelaide. This ‘Salvadorean’ effect was achieved by selecting a few common characteristics and presenting these as markers of Salvadoran ‘culture’ and ‘identity’. The term Guanacos, for example, is an image invoked by Salvadoreans when referring to themselves as members of a national collectivity. One section of the program was therefore named raíces guanacas ‘Guanacos roots’, and the audience of the program was often addressed as the Guanacos in Adelaide.

Initially this section of the program was called ‘our land’ (nuestra tierra) but the organisers felt that this name was too close to Voces de Nuestra Tierra and as such decided to change it. During one of the programs they asked the listeners to propose a different name for this section. Most of the suggestions alluded to the ‘Salvadorean-ness’ of the programs, such as somos Salvadoreños (we are Salvadoreans), mi tierra (my land), mi raíz (my roots, my origin), mi Cuscatlán (my Cuscatlán — the indigenous name of El Salvador) and raíces guanacas which was eventually chosen.

This particular section of the program presented a short historical account, a discussion about particular Salvadoran celebrations, a poem or a popular folktale. The participants, according to the presenter of this section, saw it as a means of teaching ‘our children as well as other Latinos about our Salvadorean history and culture’. Yet there were many other less structured or formal references to ‘national’ identity which were often made during the program.

Like Voces, the program was not only about particular representations but became a social event in itself. The Salvadoreans would literally take over
the small radio station and, apart from
the organisers and the presenters, friends
and people who did not actively
participate in the program would show
up and sit outside the studio. The drama
outside the studio was as important as
what was going on within the studio and
what was broadcast on-air. At times there
would be up to five people in the studio
and a similar number of people outside
the studio. During the off-air sections,
when the music was playing, people
would come in and out of the studio,
bring the Saludos and joke about a
particular song or a particular mistake
that was made in the readings.

The team that ran the program
consisted of people from different age
groups and more or less the same
numbers of female and male organisers
and presenters. The programs were often
accompanied with food and drinks and
the participants tended to stay, talk and
tell jokes long after the program had
ended. It was also common to organise a
pupusiada to mark birthdays and other
special occasions for the participants.

As in Voces, the program had a section
dedicated to community announcements,
but seeing themselves as a ‘community’
program meant not just announcing but
also talking about different local social
activities. The program reported, for
example, the results of local amateur
soccer matches. Interestingly, such a
‘locality’ was also constructed in relation
to the ‘imagined community’ in El
Salvador. The sports section provided the
results of soccer matches played in El
Salvador alongside the results of ‘local’
matches. As such the program created a
cultural space that brought together life
for Salvadoreans ‘here’, and the present
life in the homeland.

The music on the program was also
very different from the music played on
Voces. Initially, the intention was that the
program would broadcast music ‘for
everyone’. The broadcasters therefore
categorised the music according to
musical styles that they saw as suited to
the particular social characteristics of the
‘community’. They looked for ‘songs for
the oldies’, ‘songs for young people’ and
even ‘children’s songs’. Most of the songs
played during the program consisted of
popular ‘Latin’ music such as merengue,
música tropical, cumbia, salsa, bolero and
balada romántica. The preference was for
popular music that could be heard in
many parts of Latin America as well as
amongst the large Latin American
diaspora, and especially in the US. In this
sense the music was not ‘Salvadorean’ per
se, even when it was clear that this sort
of ‘Latin’ music was very popular in El
Salvador.

Interestingly the different musical
character of Voces from the Salvadorean
Program was explained as a cultural
difference between the Chileans and the
Salvadoreans. This is how Monica, one
of the participants in the Salvadorean
Program, puts it:

Last week I met someone who is what you
can call objective, he is not a Salvadorean and
not a Chilean. He asked me why Voces is
always so political and why the music they
play is always protest music while in our
program we play music that is much happier
and we never talk about politics. I told him
that this is so because we see life differently
from the Chileans. We as Salvadoreans
suffered a lot, probably more than the
Chileans, yet we always try to continue with
our lives and not to see our lives as that of a
victim. We take responsibility for our lives
and do not try to look all the time for someone
to blame for our situation. It is important to
change, to continue your life despite the sufferings and the painful memories.

It is interesting to note that popular music in El Salvador (and elsewhere) is not necessarily ‘Latin’ music, rather it often includes many songs and musical genres in English, mainly from the US. Yet, due to the migratory experience an ‘ethnic radio program’ is always about a particular ‘identity’ and as such will tend to play only music that is considered to be part of the ‘original’ identity. This is also true in the case of Voces in which the music that was presented as ‘truly’ Latin American was consciously selected in contrast to the more popular ‘Latin’ music.

One of the most striking differences between the two radio programs was the style of presentation. The two programs differed not only in the claims they had for particular ‘identities’ and their different interpretations of the local ‘community’, but also in the performance itself. As in Voces, the news and other texts presented in the Salvadorean Program were also read almost unedited, yet the Salvadorean presenters developed an informal way of addressing each other, and talking to each other ‘on-air’. This type of Bla Bla Bla, as the participants described it, made the presentation style of the program more fluid and rapid than the formal ‘reading’ in Voces.

This is how Pablo, a Chilean migrant who was not involved in the making of these programs but normally tuned in to listen to both, described this difference to me:

*In terms of presentation, I thought they [Voces] were very boring. You can’t compare it to the Salvadorean Program, for example, which is natural, has a great flow, it’s edgy, has a rhythm and I’m not talking about the music, I’m talking about the on-air communication and presentation. It’s a very community focused program and represents all branches of the community. I think they have done a great job of learning from the defects of other programs.*

Such a statement should not be read as if the Salvadorean Program was simply better than Voces; rather, it shows how the different style of presentation, more than the content itself, became one of the major distinctions between the two programs.

The ‘Salvadorean-ness’ of the program was exhibited and performed on a level that was very different from simply reading the ‘national news’ or playing the national anthem. ‘Being’ Salvadorean was about the particular way language was being used. This vivid style of presentation was important in the way it worked to construct a particular Salvadorean ‘essence’ of the presenters and the program. The particular accents of the presenters and the use of Salvadorean ‘slang’ (*caliche*) and jokes became an important part of the program. Talking *caliche*, and having a Salvadorean accent, operated here in a similar manner to the way Voces used its music. Interestingly the use of *caliche* also generated criticism by some Salvadoreans who felt that this type of ‘bad’ language had no place on radio. Still the use of *caliche* worked as a boundary marker, something that only Salvadoreans could understand and be a part of.

**Voces**, in contrast, had never emphasised the performativity of ‘language’ in such a way. The presenters’ accents had no special role in the program. It was the ‘political’ message or the political identity of the program that was stressed and performed, rather than
a particular accent or ‘slang’. For the Salvadorean presenters, however, like the use of the *nueva canción* in *Voces*, talking *caliche* about events that happened locally was seen as the real connection to El Salvador.

The adoption of this blatant ‘Salvadorean’ national identity often collided with the construction of the Salvadoreans as part of the larger ‘Latin American community’. In fact being ‘too’ Salvadorean was always seen as potentially alienating for non-Salvadorean listeners. In order to combat the criticism of being a program just for Salvadoreans, the presenters decided to mention other Latinos when addressing their audiences. ‘This program is your program for the Salvadorean family and all other Latinos who live here in South Australia.’ This statement was deliberately promoted on various programs in order to be more inclusive of the non-Salvadorean listeners. In that sense, as much as it was about a particular ‘identity’, the program was also seen as a means of uniting ‘our’ ‘Latin American community’.

One interesting example of the collision between being both ‘Salvadorean’ and Latino was evident when it was decided to broadcast a special fundraising program for the victims of the massive devastation in Central America left by Hurricane Mitch. An immediate question was whether the Salvadorean Program should collect money only for El Salvador, or whether it should collect and send the money to the rest of the countries affected by the hurricane. Those in favour of helping only El Salvador argued that, as Salvadoreans, ‘we need to help, first of all our families and our compatriots’, especially when world attention was on Honduras, which had been devastated to a much larger degree. Those who were against such a particularistic position claimed that privileging El Salvador would be seen as Salvadorean egoism. The program found itself in a difficult position. While presenting itself as a Salvadorean Program, helping just the Salvadoreans would drive off any other Latinos, especially those from the countries that were badly devastated who would see it as an insult. It was finally decided to ask the listeners to name the country to which they would like to donate. The feeling that it would be ‘unfair’ to privilege El Salvador illustrates how, in one sense, the Salvadorean Program (which in the first place was defined as ‘Salvadorean’ in relation to the idea of a general ‘Latin American community’) always had in mind the rest of the Latinos.

By adopting a particular national identity, the program had also become a place where special national holidays were marked and celebrated by dedicating a particular program and playing particular songs and encouraging listeners to send special *saludos* for these occasions. ‘Teacher’s Day’, ‘Independence Day’, ‘Father’s Day’ and ‘Mother’s Day’ were all mentioned and celebrated according to their calendar dates in El Salvador. Like the commemorative aspects in *Voces*, the celebration of national holidays at the Salvadorean Program worked to promote the imaginary world of the homeland in the new locality, even if these took on very different forms and expressions. 32

**CONCLUSION**

‘Ethnic media’ are often idealised within official multiculturalism. Such media are presented as one of the main
achievements of the policy and are seen as evidence and an expression of ‘cultural diversity’, and as sites where ‘ethnic/migrant communities’ are tolerated while enriching the Australian nation. Yet the actual use of such media by different migrant groups points to the complexity of the diasporic position and the ‘duality of place’. The media, while undoubtedly a site of struggle over the ‘community’ and ‘locality’, are also where the diasporic experience is being constructed and particular identities are performed.

There is a need, therefore, to distinguish between the official definition of the migrants and their communities within the multiculturalist imagery, and the various ways in which ‘ethnic’ media operate as social constructions about, by or for, a particular minority group. The ‘ethnic programs’ are not only a result of the state reification of the localisation of ‘ethnicity’ and the ‘community’; rather, despite such official discourse, migrants construct and generate contested experiences and interpretations of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ place in ways that compound this duality into a particular diasporic locality. The music, the cultural content of the programs, their style of presentation and the ways in which their performances of ‘culture’ become a form of migratory gathering, enable the broadcasters and the audiences to construct a feeling of being at ‘home’ in the new place.

The point of the comparison between the two radio programs is not to argue that one was better than the other, or merely that the two were very different from each other, even though they were both officially operating under the same framework and from a similar cultural logic. Nor was the point to show that the Salvadorean Program was more ‘community’ oriented in contrast to Voces which was more ‘nostalgic’ in its reference to the ‘past’. Instead, I would argue that both programs were attempting to construct diasporic identities and perform different interpretations of the migratory experience.

Is it only a Latin American experience? I believe not. Such cases merely point again to the need to criticise the image of ‘culture’ that is carried by official multiculturalism. Attempts to stay connected to their countries of origin are the means by which migrants come to understand and experience their life in a ‘new’ place. Such attachments are not merely an act of nostalgia or part of the effort to maintain culture, as depicted by multiculturalism. Rather, relations with the homeland are part of the ambiguity of ‘home and away’ that constitute the life experiences of many immigrants and construct their various ways of generating ‘communities’ in their new context.

ENDNOTES


4 Medibank was a national health fund promoted by the Labor party.
Radio-SBS presents its programs as language programs (68 in total) and not as programs which are directed at a specific ethnic or national group. For example, the ‘Spanish’ programs include Latin Americans and Spaniards who are deemed to be members of a single ‘Language Community’. As Jakubowicz explains, this definition was a result of a decision, taken by the SBS management, to prevent nationalist and ethnic separatist groups taking control of the programs (A. Jakubowicz, ‘Speaking in Tongues: Multicultural Media and the Constitution of the Socially Homogeneous Australian’, in H. Wilson ed., Australian Communications and the Public Sphere, (Melbourne: The Macmillan Company of Australia, 1989, pp. 105–127).

Community Radio is part of public broadcasting in Australia, which involves non-profit non-government stations serving particular geographic areas. For a detailed political history of the emergence of community broadcasting in Australia, see Thornley, Broadcasting Policy in Australia. Most licensed community radio and community television stations and those aspiring to gain such a licence are part of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA), a national representative organisation for community broadcasters.

‘SBS radio — the many voices of one Australia’ — is the jingle of the ‘language community’ programs of SBS radio that is played every hour before each language program.


14 Ethnic program grants are available to stations based on the number of hours of non-English programming broadcast. Broadly speaking, a fundable program must: 1) be in a language mainly other than English; 2) contain no more than 50% music content; 3) have a spoken word content of no more than 25% religious material or references; 4) be produced under the auspices of a recognised local ethnic community language group; 5) be locally produced; and, 6) be broadcast between 6 a.m. and midnight. (http://www.cbf.com.au)


16 The majority of these migrants and refugees are Chileans and El Salvadorans but there are also smaller groups of Latin Americans from other counties such as Peru, Uruguay and Colombia. Most Latin Americans arrived in Australia during the 70s and 80s as refugees or under the Humanitarian Program, as well as on family reunion visas. According to the Settlement Data Bulletin, from November 1997 there were 3148 Spanish-speaking people in South Australia at that time.

17 One of the interesting aspects of what is often called ‘long-distance nationalism’ is exactly the way in which physical ‘distance’ disappears and ‘is becoming of minor relevance in modern nationalist struggles’, (Z. Skrbiš, Long Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and


27 According to the questionnaire distributed at various social activities, such as fiestas and soccer matches, they found that 84% of listeners were Salvadoreans and the others consisted of Latin Americans of other nationalities. Such data is, of course, partial because the sample was very small and not representative.


30 Such a *pupusiada* would normally take place after the program at a private house of a Salvadorean family which operated as a restaurant, where they prepared and sold *pupusas*, the Salvadorean national food.

31 In the questionnaire mentioned above, for the question: ‘What kind of music do you think that the program should play more or less of?, the following categorisations were used: ‘Rancheras que dan cólera, Románticas, Tangos, Cúmbia, Música viejita, Tríos, Merengue, Vallenato, Rumba, Rock en Español, Otra’.

These words of a Cuban migrant, who had been living in Australia for nearly 30 years, reflect his joy at being able to have something that people in the country of origin used to enjoy. But they also reflect the irony that products like these, which this migrant used to eat a long time ago in his homeland, are no longer available there, yet are available in his acquired home country of Australia. There is loss and re-encounter in this story, but in a different setting and in an inverse order. To a certain degree, this story shows why some Cuban migrants decided to make Australia their home. However, the story here goes beyond the simple act of eating. It is about the love that Cubans have for their national cuisine, and their expressions of identity through this aspect of their national culture. This is illustrated through the personal accounts reviewed below.

This paper explores the relevance of food in the maintenance and re-creation of Cuban identity amongst a group of migrants who have been living in Australia for nearly 30 years. Through this exploration it is suggested that the existence of a substantial ethnic food market in Australia has facilitated Cuban migrants’ maintenance of their previous eating habits, and through this their sense of Cuban identity.

CUBAN MIGRANTS IN AUSTRALIA

The political, economic and social changes experienced in Cuba over the last forty years have promoted several waves of migration, extending largely to neighbouring countries, but also to other more geographically, culturally and/or historically distant countries. There are, however, smaller groups who live in other Latin American countries, as well as Canada, the Middle East, Russia, Africa and Australia.3

The first numerous group of Cuban migrants to arrive in Australia came in the early 1970s. The majority of this group came from Spain through an assisted passage program. Amongst those arriving at this time, some had earlier migrated to the US. This first group,
coming from Spain and the United States, was mainly composed of Cuban families of Spanish descent.

The second migration intake took place in the 1980s, corresponding to the ‘Mariel boatlift’ in which approximately 125000 Cubans left Cuba for the US. The Australian government admitted some Cuban migrants at this time through a refugee scheme, after interviewing them in Peru and the United States. Like their counterparts in the US, this group of ‘Marielitos’ in Australia, mainly composed of males, was stereotyped by the local media as ‘delinquents, blacks and people who didn’t intend to stay in Australia and were planning to leave for the US’.

Cuban immigrants who have arrived in Australia during the last 15 years have tended to enter through the family reunion component of Australia’s immigration policy. Some of these migrants are married to Latin Americans, Eastern Europeans, people from the Middle East and south-east Asia, who studied or worked in Cuba or in some Eastern European countries. Other Cubans are married to people of Australian background. On this basis, the 1996 Census of the Australian population found 231 Cuban-born people living in New South Wales.

A NOTE ON THE INFORMATION GATHERING PROCESS

This work is a part of a major research study of Cuban migration in NSW, Australia. As noted above, there are fewer than 250 Cuban-born people living in NSW. Due to this small number, it was not possible to contact people through official channels such as Migrant Resource centres or other institutions working with local ethnic groups. Given these constraints, I first contacted some Cuban migrants by attending social activities of the Latin American community in Sydney. Building on these initial contacts with members of the Cuban community, I was invited to some private gatherings and social events. The main methods used for collecting the information for this work were participant observation and informal interviews.

BEING ‘CUBAN’ THROUGH FOOD

Going through my fieldwork notes, I was immediately struck by the frequency of evocations of food, especially in the household settings. Indeed, food soon emerged as an important part of the lives of Cuban migrants whom I met. This was no doubt linked, in part, to my being obliged to eat or drink something during my social visits which, in turn, highlighted and reflected the importance of food. Additionally, it was notable that many of the houses that I visited displayed very few visible symbols or markers of the ethnicity of their Cuban inhabitants. Indeed, some of these houses are not very different from the middle-class suburban Australian house, with a flower bed garden outside and expensive leather lounge inside. The display of a small Cuban flag in the middle of a dining room table, or a smaller version of it as a fridge magnet, was in some cases the only visible symbol of Cuba in those houses.

As soon as the guest arrives he or she is invited to a short black and sweet Cuban style coffee. And then, immediately, the stories start to be told about which coffee ‘nearly has a Cuban flavour’, where to get it, how long it needs to be roasted and so on. The seemingly typical, middle-class, Australian suburban house begins its trans-
formation. The aroma of the coffee and the continuous invitations to stay longer for lunch and/or dinner, or at least a small snack, have ‘Cubanised’ the house.

Experiences like these led me to conclude that, for this group of Cubans, the maintenance of their previous food habits constitutes a way in which they try to reinforce and re-create their identity.

Ghassan Hage suggests that this type of recreation should be seen as positive nostalgia, arguing that ‘the positive nostalgia does not necessarily involve a desire to “go back”’, but promotes the desire of “being there here”. Hage adds that migrants tend to reproduce or borrow their previous ‘imaged homely experiences’ in the most diverse ways and situations, such as living in a suburb surrounded by people from the same language, or ‘surrounding oneself with culturally pleasing objects, smells and sounds’. Moreover, Hage claims that when migrants borrow these previous homely experiences they are better equipped to confront life in the new country, and to make better use of the opportunities offered to them by the new society.

The practices of food consumption and production in migrant homes, as found amongst these Cuban migrants, are good examples of these processes. During the fieldwork I encountered many similar situations in which Hage’s arguments were directly applicable. For example, a Cuban man who has been living here for more 30 years, after first migrating to Spain, commented to me:

When we arrived, we lived in a hostel, in Villawood. We were not allowed to cook there. Every day we were fed rice and smelly lamb. I didn’t like it, because here people do not marinate meats for a long time. However, a few weeks after our arrival someone gave us a small electric stove, so we decided to prepare our own food. We bought and took home some chicken and rice. Marta prepared a big pot of arroz con pollo [chicken and rice].

His face lit up at this point. He continued:

It was more chicken than rice in the pot. Me di una hartada! [I ate a huge amount!]. I even licked my fingers. It was so good ... delicious. This was one of my happiest moments in Australia. I was so happy that I told her [his wife] after eating: ‘Marta, I will stay here! Here, in Australia!’

I laughed and inquired further whether the chicken and rice made him stay in Australia? He proudly replied: ‘Yes, what else do you need?’

This encounter illustrates how important it was for this man to be able to eat the food that he was used to in his homeland. It is also interesting how this ‘previously homely experience’ helped him to decide to stay permanently in Australia. Two other issues need to be considered here. First, the family in this passage left Cuba in the 1970s, when the scarcity of some foods and traditional products was becoming more acute, with meats in particular suffering a considerable reduction. The introduction of food rationing also acted as a push factor in many migrant cases. In this context we can understand why the informant highlights things like there being ‘more chicken than rice in the pot’. Second, in Cuba chicken and rice was traditionally considered a ‘Sunday dish’, or a dish that must be cooked when guests or visitors are coming to the house. However, this tradition has declined in Cuba.

It should be pointed out that the
Cuban diet and food habits have changed substantially over the last century, particularly after the triumph of 1959 Revolution. The US embargo, and the lack of hard currency of the Cuban government, directly affected the acquisition of some spices and products used in traditional Cuban cuisine. As a result some of the most traditional plates of Spanish or Caribbean origin have nearly disappeared from the daily and festive Cuban cuisine in contemporary times. This has also impacted on the nationally favoured dishes. As noted previously, before 1959, *arroz con pollo* and *tostones* (fried green bananas) were the standard Sunday dinner. Today it is likely to be *arroz con pollo*, or black beans with rice, or any other dish. However, one fact that hasn’t changed over the years is the act of leaving the ‘protein meal’ of meat or fish, or the ‘best’ food, for the weekends or special occasions when the family gets together.

In contrast to this contemporary reality in Cuba, I found that the diet of the oldest Cuban migrants in Australia has only changed slightly, although some of them, due to their age, have become more health conscious about their diet. For example, in the catering for some social activities, Cubans are keen to include an Argentinian *asado* (barbecued beef) or Uruguyan sweets made of filo pastry and caramel, both of which are popular in Cuba. In the household situation only slight changes can be perceived over the extended period that the Cuban migrants have been in Australia. Once I remarked to a group of Cuban women that I admired how little their diet had changed after such a long time. Some of them started to blame their husbands for not being open to innovations and change in the kitchen. They also complained that their husbands wanted to eat ‘rice and beans’ everyday. However, these women pointed out that with their children and grandchildren the case was different. They didn’t want to eat ‘hard food’ or (Cuban food), but only *chucherias* (snacks and fast food). The women disapproved of this tendency.12

We can see here the ambiguity in the attitudes of these Cuban women. On one level, they blamed their partners for not wanting to try dishes from a different cuisine but, at the same time, they didn’t agree with a complete change of eating habits for their children, from the traditional Cuban diet to fast food products. This example highlights the expected diversity amongst age groups in relation to food. Additionally, it can be argued that this is also used to differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups, in the sense that the maintenance of food habits also serves as a self-assurance marker of their identity, and a divider between them and ‘others’. For example, while an informant was telling me about her experiences with an Australian neighbour who was an elderly person, she remarked several times:

You know ... they [Australians] do not feed themselves properly. They like vegetables, fruit and ‘watery’ soups. This isn’t food. So, I always used to tell my neighbour that she should eat real substantial food.

When I asked her what she meant by that she replied:

I mean … I mean rice, meat, and beans. I mean that she needs to have hot milk with chocolate in the afternoons.

The point here is not so much the content
of the diet pattern proposed by the informant, but the way in which food acts as a marker of ethnic belonging.

On another level, the eating habits of this group of migrants are also used by other groups, especially other Spanish speaking groups, to stereotype Cubans as sweet toothed (i.e. big sugar consumers), rice eaters, chicken lovers and coffee drinkers. In a social barbecue held in La Casa Latina at Marrickville community centre in Sydney last year, a South American cook told me that when he has Cuban customers he usually cooks chicken because this is ‘what Cubans like. They do not like slightly cooked meat, especially beef.’ The same person, together with other South American people, questioned my identity because I do not drink coffee. He loudly exclaimed: ‘Ah, here is a Cuban who doesn’t drink coffee!’ The same person, together with other South American people, questioned my identity because I do not drink coffee. He loudly exclaimed: ‘Ah, here is a Cuban who doesn’t drink coffee!’ It should be noted that I encounter similar responses whenever I visit the house of a Cuban migrant.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that Cubans tend to include in or exclude someone from their ethnic group, based on their behaviour when serving or eating food. This can be seen in the story recounted by a Cuban woman about her visit to a restaurant co-owned by a fellow country person. Some of her impressions when she was served included the following:

When they brought us the food, I was astonished! Everything was very small. You could count the pieces of vegetables, and the two small pieces of steak ... terrible! It was so small. I thought that they were closing because they were going bankrupt for the lack of customers. They serve too little. Then I thought: ‘What sort of Cuban is this? Cubans are generous with food. They always serve a lot.’

This informant tried to assure me that the restaurant’s owner had ‘learned this custom elsewhere. This was not Cuban.’ On another occasion, a different Cuban informant made some comments about an invitation she had received to a party. She was outraged because she was asked to bring a plate, emphasising to me:

Where have Cubans learned these customs? When in Cuba did you ever go to a party and bring food? If you are the host you need to invite people and serve them, you are inviting them to your house. I never saw that there, even during the difficult times. It’s ridiculous and is not Cuban!

It is interesting how food is used to question somebody’s ethnic identity in these situations. Additionally, the act of negating the ethnic affiliation of those people, and highlighting their newly acquired habits, shows that the informants have a set of concepts and images about how someone can be Cuban in relation to food, or more specifically how a Cuban host is ‘supposed to be’ in relation to food.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the low numbers and loose spatial distribution of the Cubans in NSW are factors that are likely to lead members of this ethnic group to reinforce their identity through something like their previous national cuisine. The Cuban migrants are rarely identified by others as Cuban, the closest tending to be Latin American due to their Spanish accent, since externally they do not look different from other Latinos, Southern Europeans or Africans. Given this, their eating habits are apparently a unique external marker that help people to check out and contest who is an authentic Cuban and who is not; what is Cuban and what is not.
THE MULTICULTURAL ETHNIC MARKET AND THE RE-CREATION OF THE 'CASI CUBANO' (NEARLY CUBAN)

A general overview of the Cuban cuisine makes it easier to understand how Cuban migrants in Sydney have been able to re-create and maintain their previous food habits. The different migration waves that swept the Caribbean region over centuries have influenced the culture and the culinary habits of the region. As with any cuisine in the Caribbean region, the Cubans have taken elements from the local Amerindian traditions, Spanish, African and Chinese cookeries. The Cuban cuisine is a blend of Spanish and African ways of cooking applied to tropical ingredients and products. This mix took place when the Spanish colonisers made African slaves housemaids to cook 'Spanish' dishes with imported and locally available products. The increasing immigration of Chinese indentured workers added other flavours to the Cuban cuisine. Some dishes of the Spanish and Chinese cuisine are so entrenched in Cuba that they are consistently included in Cuban cookbooks. For example, the recipes of paella and arroz frito (fried rice) are staples, qualified only as being 'Cuban versions of ...'  

Rice, beans, sweet potatoes, taro, cassava, boiled or fried bananas, pork and beef are some of the main products used in Cuban cooking. These products are combined in soups such as the traditional potajes which includes black, kidney or white beans boiled with pork or beef bones, or the traditional ajiaco and its newer cousin, the caldosa. The caldosa is a soup made with cassava, pumpkin, sweet potatoes, corn, different meats from chicken, lamb, beef or pork, and whatever other vegetables and spices are available. In the seasoning of Cuban food, the dishes are highly seasoned, but not spicy hot. Chilli is rarely used in Cuban cuisine, with only a handful of traditional Cuban dishes that require the use of chilli or pepper. Instead, the seasoning of Cuban dishes uses salt, lime, sour orange, garlic, onion, tomatoes, capsicum, roasted cumin, bay leaves, vinegar and cilantro in any combination. From these spices, salt seems to be the most important because of the popular belief that the salt is the ultimate ingredient which gives or reinforces the flavour of any dish. If salt is appreciated, sugar is adored. Sugar, one of the main cash crops of the Cuban economy, is one of the most loved components in Cuban cuisine. Its use is considered a must in black coffee, fruit juices and marmalades. Cuban people enjoy drinking guarapo (sugar cane juice), guarapiña (fermented pineapple juice), extra sweet orange juice and bananas, sapotes and sweet mango milkshakes. The Cuban cuisine has a marmalade recipe for nearly every tropical fruit available in the island. The most popular ones are those prepared from coconut, guava, mango and pawpaw. They are usually served on their own or with (preferably white) cheese.  

Based on this brief overview, it is easy to understand how relatively easy it has been for Cuban migrants in Sydney to reconstruct and maintain their former eating habits. Of course, like all the other migrant groups, they are not able to find some particular products or, in some cases, a product with precisely the ‘right flavour’, but this is changing. This can be appreciated in the words of one participant: In the beginning, it was very difficult to find spices for cooking. You couldn’t get cumin, garlic, bay leaves, so to get the Cuban
flavour in a dish was a real challenge. Now it is much better, but it’s still not the same. For example, the chorizos here are not moist like they used to be in Cuba. The chorizos from ‘El Miño’, their taste was very different. You are lucky now we have nearly everything [for cooking] here.

A further aspect emerging from my fieldwork is that the Cuban migrants of the older generation were almost always keen to emphasise that, when they arrived, they needed to get some products from specific places. For example, one person told me that she used to travel from the Western suburbs of Sydney to Bondi, to buy black beans and garlic. Some of the migrants also started to grow some plants themselves, including lime trees, aji cachucha (a sweeter version of chilli habañero), and even sugar cane. Additionally, among some of them the notion of preserving these plants was very precisely observed. For example, sugar cane is grown in Cuba, but it is not a common backyard plant. Here, some Cuban migrants have a sugar cane clump in their backyards. The variety that is most widely planted is called Media Luna (Half Moon). One Cuban man told me, while I was admiring his sugar cane plants:

You know that the Cuban government stopped planting Media Luna in Cuba. They said that it was not profitable, that it didn’t produce as much sugar as they expected, so it stopped being produced on a large scale. I don’t agree with them. Media Luna is very nice and sweet, you will try it. So we have been conserving it here! I will give you a bit [of sugar cane], you need to plant it too!

The words express the informant’s pride at saving this sugar cane variety, which was not considered sufficiently productive back in Cuba. Underlying these expressions, however, were deeper sentiments. To have a sugar cane clump in your Australian backyard is Cuban, but to have a variety discarded by the government from which he fled is seen to have even more prestige. While there is much nostalgia, and an effort to reconstruct those familiar flavours here in Australia, this example takes on a political dimension.

In recounting their life experiences in Australia, these Cuban migrants also tend to highlight that the increased migration from different places around the world has been very useful to them in relation to food. This can be seen in these comments about how and when they find a product which resembles or is ‘nearly Cuban’ in flavour, taste or appearance.

I remember that when we arrived you could hardly get an avocado or bananas, even garlic or black beans. Today all these things are available here, thanks to migration. Take for example the cassava. It started to be imported from the Pacific for the Islanders. I found that the Fijian [cassava] is the best. It tastes like cassava in Cuba. The Indonesian cassava is not very good. The same with the taro, the frozen one has a better quality and value for money.

Señora, this [Italian] bread is the closest one to the pan duro [crusty bread] in Cuba. It is very nice. We always get it from the Italians, they make it by hand. The Vietnamese bakery sells good bread, but it doesn’t last long, and it becomes soggy the next day. The Italian one is the closest bread that we have found to the Cuban pan duro. It is very crispy like in Cuba.

I get the coffee from a Lebanese shop in Fairfield. They roast it on the spot. Carlos
also swears that this is the closest coffee roasting to the Cuban counterpart that he had been able to find here in the Western suburbs of Sydney.

At this point the informant brought me the coffee jar and the grinder to smell it. After that he remarked again that ‘the roasting is dark like in Cuba’.

These accounts provide examples of how this group of Cuban migrants has used the increasingly wide offerings of the Sydney ethnic food market to reconstruct their cuisine and maintain the flavour of their beloved Cuban dishes in their everyday lives. Some scholars have criticised the way in which cultural expressions such as food and dance are used as the ‘acceptable face of multiculturalism’. However, in this study, the expansion of the ethnic food market has clearly involved a positive dimension. Indeed, it shows another aspect of Australian multiculturalism, in that a small community is able to reconstruct and maintain a distinct identity, in part, through using some of the conditions facilitated by numerically larger groups. Thus during the last thirty years this group of Cuban migrants has been picking and choosing different products from the Italian, Lebanese, Latin American, Spanish, Asian, African and Pacific Islander shops to reconstruct their Cuban cuisine and, in turn, their sense of Cuban identity.

Cuban food has not yet entered the public domain of multicultural Australia, as has happened with other aspects of Cuban culture, the most notable being forms of Cuban music and dancing such as salsa. Up to the present, Cuban food in Australia can only be found in household settings, or in some activities organised by other Latin American communities. This situation may well change in the future. The culinary curiosity of the Australian public continues to expand, reflected in television programs that have overviewed Cuban cuisine several times via some international chefs. In June 2000 the SBS program, ‘The Food Lovers’ Guide to Australia’, dedicated one of its programs to Cuban cuisine by visiting Cuban migrants resident in Sydney and sharing a meal with them. One of the participants in the program, Nancy Sanchez, offered a recipe of congri (a traditional rice and black bean dish) for the viewing public.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that for this group of Cuban migrants, who have lived in Australia for nearly three decades, the maintenance of their previous eating habits and customs constitutes a significant aspect of their construction and re-creation of their original Cuban (national) identity. The importance of food in this construction of identity was well illustrated in the informants’ use of eating habits and the serving of food as a way of questioning somebody’s ‘Cubanness’. For these informants, to be ‘Cuban’ had many implications for food: its content, preparation, serving and consumption.

In addition, the experience of the Cuban informants highlights a very positive outcome of multiculturalism in Australia, as expressed through food. The possibilities for the numerically small Cuban community to access ‘national’ foods, via a larger and diverse ethnic food market in Sydney, was essential to their maintenance of their previous diet and, in turn, their sense of Cuban identity. In this way the outcomes of Australia’s
multiculturalism, through food markets, work to facilitate relatively small ethnic groups maintaining their identity in the diversity of multicultural society.

ENDNOTES

1 I am indebted to many Cuban and Latin American migrants for their stories, hospitality and good humour. Although they are not willing to recognise that their accounts are important, they represent their life in a new country. References to names have been changed to protect their identity. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Michael Goddard, for his continuous support in how to use anthropological data. Finally, I want to thank Tom Griffiths for helping me with the title and other English language endeavours.

2 Cassava is a native plant of the tropical part of the American continent. The most popular varieties in Cuba are crystal, sweet, sour, yellow and Cartagena. However, yellow cassava is mostly planted by small farmers, so its distribution is not very widespread. Purple banana is a variety of the Musa Rosacea and used to be planted too by small-scale farmers in Cuba (see Tomas Roig, 1953, Diccionario Botánico de Nombres Vulgares Cubanos, (Havana: Seoane, Fernandez y Cia) pp. 798, 959.

3 The majority of Cuban migrants have settled in the United States (1043992), with significant populations in Puerto Rico (20000) and Spain (between 12000 and 15000). C. Martin, ‘Al Rescate De La Subjetividad: Los Estudios Sobre La Emigración’ (The Rescue of Subjectivity: Studies About Emigration), in Temas, vol. 1, 1995, pp. 50–56.


5 García, Havana USA, p. 73.


13 N. Villapol, Cocina Cubana (The Cuban Cuisine), (Havana: Editorial Científico-Técnica, 1985) pp. 34, 38.

14 For example, see Hage, ‘At Home in the Entrails’, pp. 108–110.

As a visual artist and writer on contemporary art with a special interest in transcultural issues facing Australia, including its colonial history, I developed a specific interest in Latin America. I began to wonder how Australia would have fared if its colonisers were other than British.

My understanding of Latin American culture came about during a three-year period as a postgraduate student and artist in Bogotá, Colombia. Therefore you could say I view it through a Colombian filter that is surely of a distinct character. I believe that the Latin American experience of culture and their hybrid postcolonial societies affords us, as Australians, an insight and possible understandings that could inform our future cultural frameworks.

Over the last ten years as an Australian postcolonial artist, my work has continued to look at the cultural pressure points that signify the thresholds of transglobal identity at the crossroads of language and culture, drawing on my experience in Latin America in my thoughts — about my own place — Australia. In this paper I look at the effect of changing one’s physical context to one’s creative output. With a focus on my personal experience as an artist in Colombia contrasted with the experience of the artist Juan Dávila in Australia, I will also explore some of the wider issues of location, identity and culture.

THE JOURNEY

Let me explain my journey as an artist to Colombia. People always ask me why I wanted to live in Bogotá, not New York. Sensible question no doubt. And though it may seem strange I did not just arrive there by accident, but as the result of a well considered plan (well at least I thought so).

Before I begin it will be valuable for me to contextualise my arts practice. Early on in my work, my thinking and research was being driven by a quest to understand my personal colonial history located at Botany Bay. From 1987 until 1992 my paintings were focused on this history, exploring the idea of belonging through an intense look at the Bay as a symbol of Australian history and identity. I was interested in exploring the idea that the way in which things are born can affect how they grow and develop.

Botany Bay became a metaphor in my work for Australia’s relationship to her
colonial past. For me the Bay itself also embodies a palpable presence of our Indigenous past in its rock carvings and Indigenous community presence at La Perouse — the site of the first encounter between Captain Cook and the Indigenous people. It is the place where one of Cook’s crew, Forby Sutherland, died of illness and was buried at what is now known as Kurnell — supposedly the first white man buried here. As a place, Botany Bay — Kamay — was quickly dismissed in the first months of the colony as non-functional and barren territory to be replaced in importance by Port Jackson, now Sydney.

Subsequent years of exploitation of the Bay’s resources left it a bleak industrial ruin within 200 years of the first settlement. It became for me a metaphor for the colonial experience. That particular artistic inquiry became an exhibition of paintings called ‘Innocent Bystanders’ shown at the King Street gallery in Sydney in 1992.

This project showed me two things. First, my interest in places and spaces of encounter between cultures — and secondly, my appetite for colonial histories and their relationship to the development of identity and cultural processes that follow them. I began to wonder how Australia might have developed in 300 years or how we would have developed had we been settled by the Spanish or the Dutch. It was this
project that made me ask myself the question ‘How will Latin Americans mark their 500 years of colonisation?’

My journey began when I won a postgraduate scholarship from the Colombian government to study Latin American art history at the Universidad De Los Andes. As far as I understand, I was the first Australian to receive this scholarship. It was 1992, pre-internet days. Mail was slow and course information scant. With a copy of the letter of offer in hand, I set off for Colombia, on a wing and a prayer, via Zurich, Frankfurt, New York and Boston.

LOSS OF LANGUAGE

In her catalogue essay on the work of Juan Dávila, Nelly Richard writes:

the wandering self is polymorphous. For to cross boundaries means a change in state. Itinerancy leads to renunciation of sedentary habits binding the subject to a fixed morality or truth. By breaking out of this mould, the subject becomes a transient in identity.¹

The first time I arrived in Bogotá it was during the day. The plane pushed down through the cumulus clouds, over the mountains onto a high plain of rich green grass. In the distance the city pushed up against a panoramic backdrop of mountains embracing the city along a north–south parallel. The city towers diminished against the mountains. The Virgin Guadalupe sitting like a silver star high on the hill watching over the city.

Immediately on arrival in Colombia I was confronted with a loss of spoken language. Without my native tongue and beginning to learn another, I was transported back to childhood.

Communication became an important key to understanding this new place but language, or lack of it, became a barrier to getting there. Engagement with the Spanish language was a challenge, but luckily I did have visual language with which to communicate. The strangeness of some of the words and their concepts struck me and I began to use them as a way to handle the culture. And at once began to enjoy the game of living in translation.

In an interview with Paul Foss, Juan Dávila describes his own loss of language. He says:

I was living in Melbourne and returning to Chile for visits. The circumstances of living in two extremes of the world, in two peripheral cultures, slowly forced me to look at the materiality of the circumstances where artworks operate. It also forced me to assume the dimension of loss of language and history that emigrants have to find options for identity.²

Identity and culture are located within quite definite cultural contexts; therefore, to change country, whether as a refugee, an exile or a permanent resident, implies a certain giving up of identity. There is always a liminal space between arriving and settling into the new place where one’s identity is challenged, or perhaps, neutralised in the face of the new context. No longer are the familiar tropes of one’s culture there to remind one of who one is. An existential problem arises, particularly for an Australian, carrying the inbuilt cultural uncertainty of belonging or not belonging, and a weak sense of identity due to a lack of relationship to the narrow cultural stereotypes.
Juan Dávila came to Australia in 1973. He came not as a refugee or exile but for love. He had been an artist in Chile before arriving in Australia and was associated closely with some of the young Chilean artists who were working during the censorious time of Pinochet. As a way of belonging and engaging in the Australian culture he says, ‘I decided to strengthen my voice as an Australian’. By claiming his territory not as a Chilean artist, nor as a Chilean/Australian artist, but as an artist and through making a conscious engagement with the new culture, he was able to engage this new visual reality and culture without abandoning his Chilean cultural language and history. So his work became, in a sense, a postcolonial fusion of two marginal cultural perspectives. It became a conscious acknowledgement of his circumstances through a concrete and tangible engagement. Through this engagement he made work such as *Sentimental History of Australian Art* (1982) and *Fable of Australian Painting* (1982/83), both of which mix a range of Australian cultural icons and Latin American heroes, which convey a paradoxical comment on Australian culture within a global history of colonisation. His recent work *Woomera* (2002) does the same, alluding to racist caricatures from early print journalism and recent media images relating to the refugee in Australia. These works are a clear example of how making conscious engagement with culture, even if it is not the culture of one’s birth, may provoke new images, considerations and perspectives.

Enrolling in Latin American art history with Yvone Pinni, historian and now editor of *Art Nexus*, I began to immerse myself in the Latin American culture, through the Colombian prism. Moving into a studio with Jaime Avila — a young artist who had just exhibited in the Biennal de Bogotá 1992 — I started to paint and draw. As a student at the university I was generously included in the art community, and met artists like Antonio Caro, Colombia’s foremost conceptual artist, and the curator Carolina Ponce de León.

The problem of cultural context came welling to the surface for me very quickly. How was I going to work in Colombia and bring to bear my previous practice? Suddenly all my Australian ideas seemed irrelevant. My particular perspective on colonial histories did not appear relevant in this new place. I was losing my identity and needed to find new ways of cultural engagement, because painting in the studio was not enough.

It did not take long to realise that nostalgia for where and what had been left behind was an immobilising strategy for cultural engagement. It left me unable to partake wholeheartedly in the new culture and hence, come to new insights and understandings. Like Dávila, I decided upon a pro-active involvement in the Colombian culture.

It was at this point that my work made considerable shifts as I tried to link together my original interest in history and culture as it related to the postcolonial condition of Australia with this complex, and often violent, postcolonial situation in Colombia. This realisation led me into new areas of material exploration in which I began to experiment with a diverse array of local materials like blocks of sugar, coffee, and maize as well as use popular iconography, different supports for the artworks such as blankets, and explore combining documentary photography alongside traditional oil paintings.
With this new approach the range of my art production broadened tremendously. Apart from working in the studio, Jaime Avila and I began a series of experimental art workshops in La Picota and La Modelo Prisons in Bogotá, which resulted in several ‘Patios Urbanos’ exhibitions and the publication of a screen-printed artist’s book entitled *La virgen desnuda voladora*, exploring perceptions of the city as seen through the eyes of those incarcerated. Through the university I was able to participate in cultural exchange programs in the provincial centres of Rioacha and Puerto Inirida. And through my involvement with the Bogotá art community I was selected to exhibit in a couple of the National and Regional Salons — annual survey art exhibitions — and several of the curated exhibitions such as the *Salón de Arte Jóvenes*. Leaving nostalgia behind me and adopting this proactive and immersive engagement with the Colombian culture meant that Bogotá transformed into a surprising and expansive visual field in which to work.

One of the first mixed media works that I produced during this period was *Limpio de Sangre* (literally, ‘clean blooded’, but meaning ‘blue-blood’). It was a work exploring various levels of Colombian colonialism through looking at the role of the privileged classes in relation to the history of slavery, while also hinting at indigenous ingenuity and the complex relationship between them. The work was described by Barbara Bloemink in *Arte* magazine:

*‘Limpio de Sangre is* an architectural structure with cakes of dark sugar (panela) carefully arranged with an abundance of cracks giving the appearance of a jigsaw puzzle. The acrid and penetrating smell of the sugar filled the space around the work, producing a sensorial dimension for the spectator. Grand letters covered in gold leaf, and dripping a rusty colour, were inserted into the blocks of sugar forming the phrase: LIMPIO DE SANGRE, words that played ironically on the history of gold in the pre-Colombian era, and on the political and economic situations in the country that have caused the spilling of blood.4

Another sculptural work from this period was *PAX*. It comprised a metal barbecue, typical of the Los Llanos region,
which is normally hung over a fire and around which large thin pieces of beef are draped to cook and smoke. In this work the letters P-A-X have been inserted into the metal structure to form a field of cold blue within. On closer inspection there are deathly images on the blue letters that have been cut and photocopied from the local newspaper. This work employs ironic juxtaposition as a means of reflecting on the endemic urban violence, but it also made reference to the guerrilla movements that developed in the Llanos region during the mid-twentieth century, as the style of BBQ comes from that region.

A third work, employing local materials as metaphor during this period, was *Go Placidly Amid the Noise*. This enormous six-metre by two-metre triptych was made on grey blankets typically used by the ‘indigentes’ (street kids and homeless people). Each panel took up the story of a fictitious life on the street to explore the various ways in which people came to be living there. The title of the work was carved in flat wooden panels in large letters in English and then covered in gold leaf and attached across the top of the work. The work became a symbolic juxtaposition of social relationships from the life of the
most needy, represented by the blankets contrasted against the gold, and the text making reference to the role of the church and the divide between rich and poor. This work, exhibited in the 1994 National Salon, inspired a lot of debate. I was told by an artist colleague that, but for the fact that I was a foreigner, the work would have won the grand prize.

Figures 6, 6a, 6b, 6c
*Go Placidly Amid the Noise* (triptych), Mixed media on blanket 600 x 200cm, 1994
During my time in Colombia I could not be an innocent bystander, but my interpretation of what I was responding to was obviously influenced by my Australian cultural perspective that supposedly promotes an all encompassing egalitarianism. This view contrasted starkly with the Colombian perspective and experience of the world. My reactions to living in this new place were played out in my artworks, at times leading to biting criticisms. Through a visual articulation of my response to living in the complicated Colombian cultural paradigm that incorporates a strong indigenous history as diverse as Australia’s, a history of slavery that has left traces of African influences in the music and language, mineral wealth that has inspired exploitation, the drug war, incessant guerrilla activity and general political instability, to name but a few, I was able to voice my various responses to the new culture as I worked myself into understanding it and becoming a part of it.

TRANSCULTURAL VISUAL LANGUAGES

Dávila took the right as an artist to engage in Australian culture, reproducing and commenting on such heroes as Ned Kelly and our sacred icons like the meat pie and football. My participation in Colombian cultural life was welcomed by the Colombian artists: I knew I was seen as an artist first and as an Australian second. This process of moving from the outside to the inside of the culture was surprising to me as I had rarely felt that in my own country. After three years I was accepted as part of the cultural group. I was not marginalised because of my national identity nor was I given special treatment. I was able to live an active artistic life in Colombia and, in the short time I was there, I put some of my stories up for consideration alongside other Colombian artists.

On returning to Australia I was able to draw on my experience in Colombia to look openly and critically at the Australian visual and cultural reality in my work. As Latin America does not play an important role in Australia as either trading or cultural exchange partner, I decided to turn my focus locally. This led to a body of work exploring the relationship between Australia and Asia, in which both contemporary and historical attitudes and stereotypes were questioned and parodied using visual motifs in what became broadly known as the Stories from Home Project.

As a starting point for this project I interviewed 14 people between the ages of 18 and 30 about their perceptions and understandings of Australia and of Asia. The interviewees came from Australia, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Each person was asked to bring two objects with them to the interview – one representing Australia and the other Asia. I asked each person the same questions, such as, what they know about Asia/Australia, how they came to their understanding, why they selected their particular objects and I photographed them holding their chosen objects which ranged from a wok, a car and a carton of milk to hats, clothes and mementoes. These images and interviews became the basis of many of the visual components of the project.

During our talks, notions of identity and stereotypes were explored uncovering both political and historical prejudice on both sides. For instance, in
the interview with Yoko from Taiwan, she talked about her mother’s fear of her coming to Australia due to the White Australia policy which she believed still to be in force in 1997. At the time of our interview the One Nation Party had just won its first seats in parliament. The work *Lingua Franca* is a coalescence of our conversation, with a historical image of Robert Menzies, a promoter of the White Australia policy.

The historical fear of an Asian invasion or ‘yellow peril’, etched deeply in the Australian psyche, was discussed regularly and is mocked in the work *Armour Yourself* — in which a person stands poised to defend the nation with a wok in hand and lid on head, resembling an ancient Mongol warrior: Don’t fight them join them! *Ginseng Cowboy* suggests the extent to which Eastern philosophy and medicine has become an accepted part of our culture, while *Euro-Geisha* suggests an admiration for the inventive tenacity of the Japanese who have managed to maintain a balance between traditional culture and the new. The work *Timor Crossing* makes a satirical reference to various Australian artists, such as Ian Fairweather and Donald Friend who found inspiration in Chinese and Indonesian culture respectively.
The *Stories From Home* project required me to search for new ways to work with the visual material to strengthen the visual message. The experience of working as an artist in Colombia led me in my art practice to use a more diverse array of materials and media in the construction of my work. No longer strictly a painter, I began to see myself as an artist who choreographs my ideas to the medium that most suits them.

In the *Stories From Home* project, advertising and marketing imagery became a strong point of reference. My research highlighted that prejudice broke down at some level when people spoke of food and shopping. This led me to make a series of works using commercial souvenir type objects such as tea towels, plates, mugs and T-shirts. In this case the resulting images show the complexity of the ideas being explored but without proposing solutions.

In a sense this project became a visual exploration of cross-cultural dialogue focusing on Australia, looking at how exchange is manifested and expressed through our perceptions of the other. To emphasise this dialogue, images such as Borobodur, in *Tom Yum, Dick and Harry*, the Mongol hordes in *Armour Yourself* and Chinese script from the joss papers in *Follow the Leader Downunder*, all relevant to specific Asian cultures, have been employed, thus creating a cross-cultural double entendre as well as giving the
possibility of the tongue-in-cheek humour that has a transcultural interpretation, and possibly, a transcultural punchline.

One shared mythos that became apparent from the interviewees was the notion of dual identity hinting at the multicultural realities of both Australia and Asia. Four or five generations since their ancestors migrated, some of the Asian interviewees identified as Chinese-Indonesian in the same way as Australians continue to identify, for example, as Greek-Australian. If we, as Australians, intend to locate ourselves within our geographical context this complex sense of identity and belonging could be read as a regional commonality. Wanting to emphasise this idea through the Stories from Home project meant making artwork which blurred the boundary between here and there, suggesting that the faces on the street could be either Singaporean or Sydneysider.

Here it is important to mention this issue of cultural inclusion. Australia has a tendency to marginalise people, including artists, into categories such as Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB). The ‘multicultural’, as a category, therefore sits outside mainstream ‘culture’. In setting up this separate category that applies to ‘other’, and by providing special funding to make art about migrant experience and/or identity, migrant artists are limited (perhaps condemned) to the position of working within the realm of nostalgia. What is not being enabled in this approach is the possibility of full participation in the Australian culture as citizens. What Australia loses in this is the breadth of cultural images, the words and sound needed to inform a more sophisticated understanding of our culture with its complexity of cultural heritages.

Pigeon-holing artists into cultural categories limits artists to producing work which sits within the realm of nostalgia and stereotype, meaning that artists and others are kept out of full
participation in the country’s culture because their work is defined only by their previous ‘national’ definition and stays located and attached to identity which, if we recall the words of Nelly Richard, has become transient through the process of changing place. There is a danger of Australia limiting its cultural production to redundant stereotypes which do not fit the new and evolving culture we live in. If I felt a difficulty with these stereotypes in 1992, and still do, imagine how those who adopt this country as home feel about them.

In 2001 Guillermo Gómez-Peña was in Australia working with actors from diverse cultural backgrounds at the Performance Space in Sydney in a show exploring boundaries of identity. Gomez-Peña is a performance artist who challenges master narratives and explores the Chicano identity in the US in relation to the historically colonial relationship between Mexico and the US. In an interview with him last year we discussed the Australian colonial situation. Some of my questions put him on the spot but it is important to hear his perspective. Gómez-Peña reflected that:

Australia has a complicated visual reality ... The Australian art world looks more to outside of Australia than to itself ... there is not an internal gaze or questioning ... One of the very obvious differences is that as a Chicano artist my political claims are textual, they are on the table always as a Mexican living in the USA based on the clear colonial relationship between Mexico and the US. Australia doesn’t have that particular colonial history vis-à-vis the immigrant communities it has hosted.5

Later in the interview we discussed various means of finding shared ground in Australia. It is in this area that I think it is important to begin thinking of a more mainstream inclusion of the perspectives of the cultural diaspora within our culture. Gómez-Peña continued:

[In the US, the Chicanos have] some ground on which to build a political claim but that does not exist in Australia when we are talking about immigrant communities. It does exist when we talk about the Aboriginal question but not for immigrant communities. The key question of the actors while working with them was, ‘What is the cartography we are going to draft to begin to develop a
shared mythos ... and what [here in the Australian reality] is going to be the common ground?"

It is important for us to consider our shared mythos as a nation. Currently there is a dominant cultural myth that, as our nation grows, is becoming outdated as it begins to exclude the majority population. Given the breadth of cultural diversity in Australia, the icons of colonial/white Australia, like the bushranger Ned Kelly and sliced white bread, are becoming less relevant to much of the population. If, in Australia, we are to have critical engagement with our complicated visual reality and culture, and if we are to enable an envisioning of our culture that relates to our current social and political circumstances and which explores our own complex mythos, we must begin to include the voices of the artistic diaspora as an Australian voice.

ENDNOTES


2 Juan Dávila, cited by Paul Taylor, *Hysterical Tears*, p. 11.

3 Juan Dávila, cited by Paul Taylor, *Hysterical Tears*, p. 11.


5 Interview by Penelope Richardson with Guillermo Gómez-Peña at the Performance Space, Sydney 2001 (unpublished).

6 Interview by Penelope Richardson with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 2001.
DYING IN THE NEW COUNTRY

MARIVIC WYNDHAM

Before the great Cold War diaspora wrenched millions of Latin Americans from their homelands and thrust them to the fortunes — and misfortunes — of foreign lands, most of us from the region had assumed that the land of our birth would naturally also be the land of our death. Cemetery plots confirmed the passing of the generations, but they also confirmed our expectations that one day we too would join our ancestors in that same sacred family space. Visits to these plots formed part of family life: to mark birthdays, Mother’s and Father’s Days, and other special anniversaries. Sadness mingled with a deep sense of belonging on those occasions, as young children, parents and grandparents pilgrimaged as one in this time-honoured ritual of remembrance and solidarity with our dead. Family plots were an extension of our family homes, they completed the circle of life and death.

In the case of my own family, when the unthinkable happened, and my parents’ ageing generation of Cuban American exiles found themselves marooned indefinitely on foreign shores, the spectre of death in someone else’s land seemed the cruellest blow of their long years of exile. They were not the first Cuban exiles to die so near, yet so far from their beloved island. Exile movements had always been part of Cuban history. But they were our parents. That the writing had been on the wall for a long time made little difference when the time came. That, at least in part, they had conspired in the culture of denial that prevented them from preparing themselves for this eventuality, also made no difference. These were our dead and something perverse seemed to overtake the natural order of things.

Cuban American exile has a history of over two centuries. Since the nineteenth century, Cubans have turned to the Big Brother to the North for political stability and economic opportunity. The wars of independence (1868–1878, 1895–1898), the struggles of the young republic and the frequent, often sudden changes in the political life of the country of the first half of the twentieth century all contributed to Cuban emigration to the United States.

The most recent wave of migration is the Cold War diaspora that began on 1 January 1959 with the overthrow of the government of Fulgencio Batista by Fidel Castro’s revolutionary forces. By far the most lengthy of waves — forty-three years and still counting — it also dwarfs all previous ones in numbers. By April 1961, when the Bay of Pigs invasion took place, there were 135,000 Cubans in Miami; five
years later, that figure was 210,000. By 1973 more than half a million Cubans had left the island, most of them settling in Miami. The figures continued to rise. One in every eleven Cubans now reside outside the island, and of these one-and-a-quarter million Cuban exiles, the majority reside in the United States, mainly in or around Dade County, which houses the city of Miami.3

The majority of the Cubans who arrived after 1959 came during three distinct periods: immediately after the Revolution, from 1959–1962; during the ‘freedom flights’ of 1965–1973; and during the ‘Mariel boatlife’ of 1980. Typically, the first to bear the impact of the revolution and thus to leave Cuba were the middle and upper classes. Later migrants have increasingly been more representative of Cuban society, not just in socio-economic terms but also in racial, ethnic and geographic terms.4

The focus of this paper is on that first generation of Cuban exiles who fled in the period immediately following the Revolution: 1959–1962. Many were literally fleeing for their lives, implicated in the crimes committed during the regime of Fulgencio Batista. Many were not.5 Some fled the island not out of fear of political persecution, but out of concern for ‘the radicalisation of Cuban society’.6 My father was one. But whatever their political backgrounds and loyalties, this group shared a ‘moment of departure’ that would set them apart from later arrivals.

Around this moment would develop a peculiar culture of exile — a culture of denial — resonances of which can be heard and felt to this day: in Miami’s family living rooms, in cafés and restaurants in Calle Ocho, in the press and even in the official pronouncements of United States leaders, including President George W. Bush. Three myths, I would argue, grow from this moment of crisis: three myths that together underpin the culture and rhetoric of denial that is the legacy of that first generation of Cuban American exiles.

First, the myth of a forced departure: they did not leave Cuba voluntarily; they were forced to leave. “‘We never chose to come here to the United States. Fidel Castro expelled us, and we were forced to go into exile, forced to go to Miami.’”7

Secondly, the myth of a quick return, by courtesy, it was hoped — and urged — on successive US presidents, of yet another North American intervention in Cuba’s internal affairs. For decades, my father stood ready to join ‘the Marines’ when, as he expected, the American government would finally ‘come to its senses’ and liberate Cuba from communism. The reasons went beyond the ideological. The Castro government’s nationalisation of American property would surely, the logic went, prompt US intervention in the island.8 The dismal failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, an operation sponsored and financed by the US Government, may have sparked the first major wave of internal migration of Cuban exiles from Miami to other American cities, but it did little to undermine the myth of a quick return.

Thirdly, the myth of La Cuba de Ayer (The Cuba of Yesterday). Unlike those who followed them in the ‘freedom flights’ of only a few years later, the departure of that early group of exiles had been typically sudden and thus unprepared. They had no time to experience and assimilate the ‘new’ Cuba that was unfolding and continues to unfold. The Cuba they took with them
into exile was frozen in time. This Cuba — La Cuba de Ayer — would remain stubbornly and tragically their version of the ‘real’ Cuba, one that would grow into mythical proportions as the years and decades of exile dragged on and on. Concrete manifestations of pre-revolutionary Cuban society alive and well in Miami — in the form of schools, businesses and organisations that shut down in Cuba and reopened in exile — helped sustain the myth.

The new Cuban émigrés perceived themselves as exiles, not immigrants, and least of all fully fledged citizens in the new land.

They had no intention of beginning life anew as norteamericanos. They fervently believed they would return to their homeland once a more tolerable government replaced Fidel Castro’s. In this faith, they were sustained by the long history of American intervention in Cuba’s internal affairs, from the time of our wars of independence onwards.¹⁰

As they waited to return to the homeland, these early exiles ‘focused their energies on survival’.³¹ Theirs was the case of creating, out of what was then only a vacuum, a life for themselves and their families, and maybe a future colony for fellow exiles. My father and others like him — professional, well-to-do, with political links with previous Cuban governments — had it, in a sense, the roughest. Many had been caught by surprise by the swiftness with which the situation had changed. Unprepared for exile, some had not thought to transfer their accounts overseas. Nonetheless, it was they who built the nests that swarms of relatives and friends later made their first stop in exile. It was their newfound businesses that would later employ new arrivals. It also fell on them to establish semi-official relations with the American Government: setting themselves up as the conscience and the voice of free Cuba. In short, it was they who set up the foundations for the infrastructure — familial, economic, political, moral — on which the Cuban exile stands today. Most importantly, they set the tone for what was to follow. Money might be scarce and the future uncertain, but there was plenty of hope and fire here. It was only, after all, a matter of time before the situation was resolved through American intervention.

This kind of confidence in a brighter future helped to ease what was proving, for many of these exiles, a difficult transition. For the head of family, it meant setting aside questions of dignity and long-term financial security and getting on with whatever job he could find. For his wife, the idea that this was only a temporary arrangement helped to ease her loss of status and that infrastructure which had in Cuba typically provided her (in the case of my mother, for example) with a cook, laundress cum ironing lady, general cleaning woman, chauffeur and gardener. Our house in Cuba stood exactly as we’d left it for years after: ready to receive us at any time. Most of the staff had remained, all our belongings were still in place: awaiting our return. As odd as it may seem to have maintained two homes — one in Cuba, one in Miami — and two identities — one of citizen, one of exile — these arrangements helped many to come to terms slowly, gradually, with what was happening to their lives.

This blend of the practical and the idealistic — of Cuban get-up-and-go, on the one hand, and blind faith in an
American solution to the crisis, on the other — informs the history of today’s Cuban exile community. The practical impulse ensures that life goes on, and makes the best of it. The idealistic impulse maintains the fantasy of a return home, courtesy of the knight in shining armour who once before helped rid Cuba of a foreign power. Despite barriers of language and culture, the bulk of that 135,000-odd contingent integrated quickly and seamlessly into Miami’s workforce, creating a vibrant business community that lifted the local economy and drew other immigrants to the area. In practical terms, in other words, they survived admirably well.

But they never assimilated. For some forty years now, these exiles have lived lives of ‘triumphant ambiguity’. They have ‘camped’ and they have thrived — both at the same time. As one exile explained:

“We are pro-American, but we are not Americans, not yet anyway. We won’t even know what we are until things actually change in Cuba, until we have the possibility of going back. Once the exile is over, things will change, because we Cubans will finally have the freedom to make up our own minds about whether we want to be immigrants or go home.”

That such an ambiguity could persist for over four decades has in large part to do with the fact that for this special generation of exiles — the wealthy classes of pre-Castro Cuban society — the country where they ‘camped’ had always been part of their mental map of ‘home’. In pre-Castro days, the Cuban and the American had increasingly been indistinguishable in the fabric of Cuban life; such had been the insinuation of American culture — tastes, values, assumptions, expectations — into the native culture. And not only in popular culture. The fact that we grew to think of entertainers like Nat King Cole, and movie stars like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as our own was one thing. But more important still were the institutions that shaped our minds and our values from childhood onwards. Here Americans had, if not a monopoly, then their fair share of two of the country’s most powerful forces — religion and education, church and school — which, in turn, formed the basis of the country’s educational system. There were also the personal exchanges going on all the time between individuals of the two countries. Usually invisible and unrecorded, this kind of contact was immensely important in shaping the Cuban-American relationship at grassroots level. The endless flow of Americans to Cuba — on business or pleasure, to study, to visit friends, even to live there for a time — made our Big Brother to the North accessible and real.

This had been a two-way relationship. Before the Revolution, these exiles had travelled to the US regularly and sometimes for long periods, for business and for pleasure. As Cuba had been the playground of rich Americans, so had the United States been the playground of rich Cubans. But the US was not just a fair-weather friend. And this is an important point. As well as the site of fun, frivolous times, it had also been the main comfort and refuge in times of trouble. It had been home-in-exile for generations of Cubans fleeing from the latest dictator, or the latest coup. Indeed, the first Cuban to seek political refuge in the United States did so in 1823, the priest Felix Varela y Morales who sought refuge in Saint
Augustine, Florida, after being condemned to death by the Spanish authorities for demanding autonomy for certain provinces in the island. Fellow rebels eventually joined him, and they established there the first real focus of Cuban opposition to Spanish rule. By the second half of the nineteenth century, their numbers had grown to some 2000 Cubans, who were now scattered in the region between Tampa and Key West. They were mainly tobacco growers and their contributions helped to finance the war of independence.

The second major wave of Cuban migration to the States was sparked by Fulgencio Batista’s coup d’état in 1952, and it continued until 1959 when the right-wing dictator himself fled Cuba for Spain. By then some 15,000 of his political opponents had congregated in the States, largely around the Miami area. Plain facts and statistics only tell part of the story of Cuban-American relations. For every individual making that crossing, brief or lengthy as it may have been, there lies a tissue of human connectedness between the two cultures. Exile by definition is a negation of home. But the close links between the two peoples went a long way towards mitigating the worst of the exilic condition.

My own family had sought political refuge in Miami for a time in the early 1950s. For over two years we lived in ‘Mr Billy’s House’. My sisters attended the local school, and my parents carried on with the business of life. When many years later we passed the street of ‘Mr Billy’s House’ and found it gone, it was as if something of ours had gone too. Miami and ‘Mr Billy’s House’ and the friends we made then may have been American, but they were also part of our family world. Indeed, if one were to draw my parents’ generation of exiles’ mental maps of ‘home’, one would find not simply the shape of the island of Cuba, but one that looped dramatically to embrace the Florida Peninsula.

Ironically, it was this close familiarity with the country and culture of exile that both softened the extremes of the exile experience and encouraged the ‘triumphant ambiguity’ of which Rieff speaks. Cuban exiles may have been turning to the United States for political refuge for over two centuries. But there had always been an eventual return to the island. Until now. Thus, despite the prosperity of these exiles, they continued to live — metaphorically at least — with their bags packed and a strong fantasy alive in their hearts of a return to the island. The fact that, with the passage of time, such ideas ‘became increasingly chimerical did little to lessen their authority’. Over the decades, ‘the facts of exile’ had become all but inseparable from ‘the wound of exile’: a wound that would only heal when they returned to the island.15

Few of that first wave of exiles contemplated — or if they did, they did not dare articulate to their families and friends — the idea of ‘return’ before the fall of Castro. A visit to Castro’s Cuba would have been savagely condemned as a betrayal. Not only to ‘the cause’, but to the motherland herself. Throughout the first decade of exile, the 1960s:

it was, in any event, forbidden to the Cuban Americans ... to visit the island. For the revolutionaries, and, for that matter, in the eyes of many ordinary Cubans who had chosen to remain, the Miami community were traitors, people to be excoriated as gusanos, ‘worms’, and shunned if ever they were encountered.
Though Cubans continued to go into exile in Miami, ‘once they had left there was no question of their ever returning even in the most extraordinary of circumstances’. By the time a radical shift in Washington’s policy towards Castro’s Cuba in the late 1970s opened for a brief time the possibility of return visits to the island, as the Carter administration attempted a policy of détente, the cement had long settled in Miami’s exile community’s political stance on such visits. Even though in that short interlude and subsequently, the possibilities for return visits have existed, and many later arrivals have embraced the opportunity to visit their relatives in the island, the rigidly set position of that first wave of exiles on the matter continues to prevail in the dominant political culture of Miami exile.

Beneath the political rhetoric of rejection of such options, there lay larger issues. To return to Cuba, even if only for a brief visit, would have been to confront impossible realities: that they could of their own will return to the beloved island, that they could of their own free will leave her again, and that perhaps after the pain of such a visit they had discovered there was no Cuba del Ayer to nurture in their old age. Thus the emotional grip of the illusion of a ‘quick return’ that no amount of disappointments — the Bay of Pigs, the behind-the-scenes negotiations after the missile crisis that left Castro more firmly implanted on the island than ever before, the collapse of the Soviet Camp that did not bring about the expected collapse of Soviet Cuba — could dispel. Forty years and three major setbacks later, the rhetoric of denial remains. For these exiles, ‘dying in a new country’ was never the issue. That would be the by-product of a larger issue — a larger tragedy — of not dying in the old country: a country they could not bear to admit they had left voluntarily, a country they insisted lay waiting for their return, a country which their collective imaginations had fashioned into a veritable paradise lost.

The peculiarities of Cuban American exile and exile politics have prompted some to ponder on the underlying causes. Long before the advent of Castro’s revolution — as the writer of the book Exile: Cuba in the heart of Miami (1994) argues — the sense that one did not willingly leave the island to settle elsewhere was already well entrenched in the Cuban psyche. Those who could afford it, would travel widely and often. They might send their children to school in the United States. But they would always return. Rieff quotes from one inside that culture:

To leave Cuba was an admission of failure. And that took on a moral dimension as well. The person who left was somehow lessened morally, rather like an Israeli nowadays who chooses not to remain in that country. Actually, I think that one of the reasons that Cubans in Miami have been so traumatised by their exile — after all, ours is not the only exile in the history of the world; we haven’t suffered more than anyone else has ever suffered — is that this sanction against leaving Cuba was already present in the Cuban psyche before the revolution.

La Cuba del Ayer — their paradise lost — would always dwarf the realities of life in the United States. As one of countless success stories of Cuban American exiles, an entrepreneur famous for having directed the first Cuban-owned bank in the US, the Republic
National Bank, declared:

It will always be difficult for Americans to understand the realities as we Cubans in Miami see them. Immigrants want to assimilate because, by and large, they have brought with them unhappy memories of their native countries. But we don’t have bad memories of Cuba. Before 1959, we did not think the US was better. We thought Cuba was better. And most of us still do. It isn’t that I’m not grateful to the United States, or that I don’t love the United States. I do. But even though this country has been very good to me, even after thirty-three years I don’t feel comfortable here. And the reason is simple. I would rather be in Cuba.¹⁹

One might ask: which Cuba? And the answer would predictably be: la Cuba del Ayer.

So much for the rhetoric. What of the reality? This is as varied and complex as the individuals who compose Cuban-American exile at any given time. This is why I would like to share with you a personal anecdote of the new country: one that reflects the greater complexities and ironies of the realities of Cuban American exile: past and present.

In my own family, an earlier political exile in the early 1950s had, as I mentioned earlier, taken us to Miami. There my paternal grandmother died and was buried. This was to be her temporary resting place, awaiting the time when things in Cuba ‘improved’ and we could transport her remains to their rightful place at the family plot at Cementerio Colón in Havana. It was never a question of ‘if’ but of ‘when’. As it happened, we returned and she stayed. Before too long another exile had overtaken our plans to re-settle in Cuba and, in 1959, we found ourselves once again living ‘temporarily’ in Florida. Meanwhile my grandmother remained in her temporary resting place at Woodlawn Cemetery in Miami. Pilgrimages to her grave-in-exile were a regular part of family life. And for many decades, it was understood that she — and we — were living on borrowed soil and borrowed time. The day would soon come when we both — the dead and the living exiles — would return to the land of our birth. It was only with the death of my father in the early 1990s that we realised that my grandmother’s temporary grave had now become her final resting place: my father’s grave in the same cemetery ironically conferring permanence on hers.

The gravestones in Colón and in Woodlawn are witnesses to the long diaspora of Cuban dead. Woodlawn Cemetery in Miami and Cementerio Colón in Havana — two pillars of one Cuban cemetery stretching across the treacherous tides of the Florida Straits — hold in their collective tombs and mausoleums a continuum of names and dates that allow us to trace faithfully the personal and political fortunes and misfortunes of generations of Cubans. Where the dates in the gravestone ‘there’ stop, they begin ‘here’. Often — and sadly — so does their level of care and maintenance. Many of what were once the well-tended suburbs of the dead in Colón, are now grown sloppy and weedy. The reason is obvious. In Miami’s Woodlawn, on the other hand, a veritable garden blooms in the tombs of dead Cuban exiles. Families visit regularly and tend to the graves of their dead with the same care and devotion they shower on their living.

The conundrum goes to the heart of the Cuban American diaspora: with heavy hearts we bury our dead in a new
country, yet we know that, for the moment at least, here is where we want them, safe and cared for in exile. The rituals of caring for our dead run deep in the psyche and imagination of Latin Americans all over the world. Abandoning our dead in the old country and burying our dead in the new: both are part of the diaspora of mourning and grief that is life in exile.

ENDNOTES


2 García, Havana USA, p. 1.

3 García, Havana USA, p. 13.

4 García, Havana USA, p. 1.

5 García, Havana USA, p. 2.

6 García, Havana USA, p. 6.


8 García, Havana USA, p. 14.

9 García, Havana USA, p. 4.

10 García, Havana USA, pp. 1–2.

11 García, Havana USA, p. 2.


14 Rieff, The Exile, p. 28.

15 Rieff, The Exile, p. 27.


18 Rieff, The Exile, p. 18.