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Book Review: Cuba, the Elusive Nation. Interpretations of National Identity

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Fernández, Damián J. and Betancourt, Madeleine Cámara, eds. *Cuba, the Elusive Nation. Interpretations of National Identity*. Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2000. 317 pp. \$55.00 (cloth).

Less than two years ago, Alejandro de la Fuente, who specializes in Cuban studies, noted that from the late 1980s through the 1990s there was a considerable upsurge of scholarly publications on the history, society, and culture of Cuba. Many of these analyses embraced reexaminations of questions of race, racism, identity, ideology, gender relations, and nationhood. On the heels of the boom appeared the re-evaluation of Cuban history under the aegis of new perspectives. The new scholarship materialized as research interests shifted in the aftermath of the Cuban crises brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union. It beckoned as well as challenged to the commonly held beliefs of social, gender, and racial equality proclaimed by the Cuban revolutionary regime (de la Fuente 2000).

Cuba, the Elusive Nation. Interpretations of National Identity is a compilation of essays that pursues to further the research and provoke discussion on identity matters vis-à-vis nation, nationhood, and nationalism. The book focuses on the construction of cultural and national identities embraced by the polymorphic concept of *cubanismo* and its variations of *cubanía* and *cubanidad*. Under this tenor and to avoid possible confusions or misinterpretations of all previous terms, essayists agreed to use the neutral *lo cubano* as the concept that encapsulates Cuban national identity.

The anthology brings together fifteen scholars from the humanities and the social sciences. All of the authors are distinguished academics well versed in their respective fields of interest. Editors Fernandez and Betancourt called on this diverse assembly of Cuban specialists to address the organizing question and theme of the collection, "what is it that constitutes the Cuban national identity?" (2)

All the contributing authors hold positions at universities in the U.S., Cuba and Mexico and the majority belong to the Cuban diaspora. National affiliation of the authors is a relevant aspect in the assessment of the essays. Approach, perspective and interpretation of any subject are shaped by the specific positioning of the author in its social context. This is a particular truism for twentieth-century Cuban history, which unavoidably must be considered as before and after 1959. It is a history that distinguishes Cuban insiders

from Cuban outsiders but that acknowledges the collective and the individual, at home or abroad, as unequivocal Cuban. In this respect, the gist of the paradox is that identity and nation are perceived and lived differently and similarly by Cuban residents and émigrés.

The authors are aware of the different angles of examination and the complexity imposed by the historical rupture. The opposition between Cuban islanders with a nation-state and Cubans abroad with a nationality but not a nation is a taxing reality with which the Cuban analysts must contend. The contradiction is well captured by the notion of "elusive" incorporated in the title of the compilation. It also raises the question of the significance of the trans-border replica of nationhood that émigrés have build outside the island.

The book is divided into four parts. These are organized around the pivotal concept of nation. The first section is entitled "The Nation as Historical Narration." It begins with an essay by Jorge Duany examining the meanings and scope of what he considers the basic make-up of Cuban identity, Cubaness. Duany's piece is a historical review and critical reassessment of what he deems the foundational discourses of *lo cubano*, an overarching concept that crystallizes Cuban identity. Duany's contribution sets the pace for the following essays. He focuses his attention on historical works by icons of the Cuban intellectual establishment: Jorge Mañach, Fernando Ortiz, Manuel Moreno Fraginals, and Cintio Vitier. He compares their contributions with diaspora productions by Gustavo Perez-Firmat, Ruth Behar, and Juan Leon. Duany argues that islanders and émigrés must deal with a fractured national identity. Thus, a comprehensive evaluation of identity issues needs scholars willing to relinquish traditional interpretations of nation, anchored on territory and a fixed understanding of culture, and emigration, which entails displacement and alienation. In this respect, the author proposes a more fluid and comprehensive concept of nationality that would adopt *lo cubano* as an all-embracing identity incorporating islanders and émigrés. Accordingly, the implementation of the concept could facilitate the understanding of the process of identity construction of twenty-first century Cubans in a transnational world.

The second chapter in this section is penned by María Elena Díaz. She focuses her study on the relations between the religious devotion to the Cuban patroness, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, and national identity as present in *lo cubano*. Diaz approaches the topic as an historian and as-

serts that the close linkages between the religious affection to the virgin and the concept of nation are a phenomena pertaining to the twentieth century. According to the author, the relationship between devotion and nation is the result of the appropriations of the religious icon by political forces wrestling to dominate and represent the nation. Diaz traces the foundational narrative to the seventeenth century and follows-up on its consequential modifications. She studies its transformation over the expanse of three centuries from an oral local account to a written story of national outreach. The narrative was inevitably filtered by the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church adjoined by the hierarchical racial and class make-up of Cuban society.

Ada Ferrer, in the third chapter, explores the emergence of what she calls “an ideology of racelessness in Cuba” (60). The main contention of Ferrer is that a raceless ideology appeared in the later part of the nineteenth century and still persists today. The author traces the imaginings of a raceless society to the strategic multiracial alliances forged during the struggle for independence. In this context, the erasure of race came along the lines of a developing national identity. The disappearance of race as a social category and its transformation into citizenship is evident for Ferrer. She supports her thesis on the documentation produced during the last phases of the insurgency. Writings of Jose Marti and Antonio Maceo, the founding fathers of Cuban nationalism, substantiate their willingness to vanish race as an identifier. But the aspirations and perceptions of Marti and Maceo were not cohesive or shared by all nationalists as it was rather an ambiguous ideological stance. Ferrer’s argument that in insurgent Cuba the discourses of national affiliation superseded racial identification is challenging as it is appealing and calls for continued discussion in subsequent writings.

Part II, entitled “The Nation as Incomplete Desire,” is made up of five chapters. The first by Damián J. Fernández is concerned with the historical processes of nation and state building. He deems them incomplete, unsuccessful, and thwarted by the lack of cultural cohesiveness, and unfathomable social cleavages. Fernandez contends that Cuban nation building and formation of a coherent national identity have always wrestled with deep-rooted notions of assumed exceptionality and unmet expectations. The author concludes that the tensions of three competing cultural paradigms—modernity, corporatism and *lo informal*—help explain why in Cuba the political project of a modern nation-state failed or at least remains a permanent impossibility.

On a different terrain treads Madeline Cámara Betancourt in her contribution to Part Two of the compilation. The author looks at the intersections between race, gender and national identity that coalesce in the figure of the mulatta. Betancourt argues that the mulatta became the symbol of Cuban hybrid identity through the pioneering work of anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. La mulatta is a symbol and an individual outcome of racial amalgamation. As symbol it incorporates a broader set of meanings than the myth of racial harmony tends to portray. As an individual,

she is the child of violence against black women and as such does not embody racial empathy. The author based her study on the corpus of nineteenth-century literary productions and artistic representations that encoded the image of the mulatta as a cultural icon. Special focus of the analysis is centered upon the representations of the mulatta that appeared in the illustrations of the *marquillas* (cigar bands). Through a careful reading of the imagery, Betancourt concludes that the icon is not impervious to ambiguity. The stereotypical image of la mulatta is a mix of sensuality, earthiness, and defiance. At the same time, she is muffled because she does not speak or represent herself. Thus, the mulatta as symbol of national identity is deceptive and incomplete until the mulatta voices her history and social condition.

José Quiroga dwells on Cuban identity in its relation to the *boleros*. However, he transforms the usual categorization of *boleros* as melancholic ballads often bespeaking of failed, betrayed, of impossible longing or frustrated love. Quiroga steers away from this sentimental perception of boleros to define them in “terms of controlled rage” but not devoid of their sentimental appeal (116). His reflections transcend music as he delves deeper into the meanings of *lo cubano* as nationhood. The nightclub scene of La Habana of the 1940s and 1950s was the stage for the flourishing *bolero* and its popularity associated with the night club ambiance and modernity, with decadence and defiance. The bolero was sung, hummed and beloved from Mexico to Argentina, in Spain and Europe. The bolero was and is sensual, idiosyncratic, and melancholic. It is the embodiment of the pure emotion and sentiment of the melodramatic. However, the revolution with its socialist realism and prudish attitude destroyed the nightclub and displaced the stage of the *bolero*. In the second part of the essay Quiroga makes a tour de force and slides into the unsettled terrain of vague postmodernist de-constructivism. The *bolero* becomes the trope, and the alibi for reflection of a fractured self viewing and living the anxiety of the diaspora. Concentration on identity and nation swings. Now it is apparent that Quiroga is uncomfortable with the multiplicity of identities of “being a Cuban.” The Cuban American, Marieles, balseros—and all the exiles, the émigrés, the uprooted, expatriates, and the ones in the undefined abroad—are all in search for a unifying identity. There is no recognizable “we” but many “us” that are different, new, ambiguous, displaced, plural, and in constant flux.

These issues are retaken by the following essays in this section. Its emphasis is on the cultural constructs of past and present identities in post-modern Cuba and its diaspora. Ruth Behar raises questions on the identity of the “other Cubans” or those expelled from Cuba since 1965. She is particularly concerned with the multitudes of the Mariel boatlift of 1980 that were chided by the Miami exile community and disdained by conservative America. Among the *Marielitos* were the non-welcomed homosexuals, drag queens, and bisexuals. They were the marginal, non-conformists, delinquents, and rejects of the revolutionary re-

gime. At the heart of the *Marielitos* crowd were artists, writers, poets, and painters. All of them were passionately individualistic and defiant. Ironically all were children of the revolution. At home they were undesirables considered dangerous and untamable dissenters. In the U.S. they were rejected by the vocal and affluent Cuban-American community. Behar focuses her analysis on class based explanations with an emphasis on race relations that appears to be subverted by the fracture between Cuba a nation-in-exile and Cuba a nation on-the-island.

Emilio Bejel, "Cuban Condemnation of Queer Bodies," takes as his starting point the articulations between nation and homosexuality. Bejel makes a historical review of how the relation worked during the second part of the nineteenth-century. According to the author, the category of homosexuality is inseparable and firmly intertwined with the Cuban sense of nationality. Bejel centers his analysis on what he calls the paradoxes of exclusion and denial in the construction of the modern Cuban nation. In this respect, Cuban nationalism could be seen from a total different vantage point. This perspective is congealed in the most radical figure of Cuban culture, the persona of Reinaldo Arenas. According to Bejel, the late poet embodied rejection, marginality and an acerbic critique of the homogenization tendencies of the discourse of Cuban "nationalism."

Part III is composed of the three chapters that are mainly devoted to literary criticism, hence the title of "The Nation as Metaphor." Authors Antonio Vera-León, Adriana Méndez Rodenas, Nara Araújo, and Rafael Rojas are concerned with questions of nation and nationalism, gender and patriarchy, the nuances of women writing and feminism, and the trope of travel and the foreign gaze. Vera-Leon, Rodenas, Araújo, and Rojas deploy the arsenal of deconstructive analytical tools to read discourses concerned with nation and identity, national and exile literature, canon, and counter canon, exile and island literature, young and older generations of writers and artists. This section underscores the significance of interdisciplinary approaches by including discourse analysis. It also evidences the shifting ground of more traditional social and political studies to include novel perspectives coming mainly from literary studies.

The last section of the book considers music and painting. The examination is undertaken by Raúl Fernández who devotes his piece to music, and Juan A. Martínez, who is concerned with the painting of the 1940s. The historical review of Fernandez assesses the impact that international music has had on the diversity of Cuban musical genres. It also considers the enormous influence that Cuban music has had on Latin America and the world. Musical rhythms like *salsa*, *sabor*, *son*, *rumba*, *cha-cha-cha*, and *mambo*, among others, are vibrant national expressions of *lo cubano* spanning several generations of family musicians and local music communities. Most Cuban rhythms are fundamental part of the world repertoire of popular music. Martínez states that a *blanco-criollo* identity is what defines the modernist art of the 1940s. This can be read from the subjects of painters such as Portocarrero, Amalia Peláez, Carreño and

Bermúdez, who concentrated on the house interiors of the elite.

The volume concludes with the essay of Max Castro devoted to the analysis of the Cuban-American way. His point of departure, as clearly stated by the author, is the work of Gustavo Perez-Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (1994). Castro retakes the recurrent sets of oppositions inside/outside, Cuban on the island and Cuban abroad, and the assumptions and realities of both as they view each other. For the author these contradictions are the foundations of the Cuban-American identity and the multitude of ways in which it has been construed. The media, popular culture, scholarly works and the tensions between Cuba and the U.S. have contributed to form and reform claims of a unique Cuban national identity. For Castro it is ambiguity, non-conformity and incompleteness of the Cuban sense of nationality and identity, on the island or as exiles as Cuban-Americans, what represent the fractured identity articulated in *lo cubano*.

All essays on the compilation provoke reflection and open avenues for new research agendas. In the same manner, they foster dialogue across disciplines and demand more scholarly debates. Issues of race, ethnicity, racism, nationalism, gender relations, and identity construction—with its inclusions and exclusions—are all treated from different and enriching perspectives. It is noteworthy to appreciate how in this postmodern and poststructuralist frame of analysis, most of the articles steer clear from linking class analysis with their respective methodological approaches. In this respect, the absence of a more thoughtful and in-depth study of class relations and its linkages with political power, state formation, and the historical development of the nation surfaces as a limitation of the essays. Even if this was not the purpose of the volume it does, in the final analysis, preclude a better understanding of what is it that constitutes the Cuban national identity on both sides of the Florida Straits.

The collection of essays offers a comprehensive and insightful look at the multifaceted aspects of Cuban identity and nationalism. The anthology materializes as a series of vignettes on Cuban identity and nationalism in the likelihood of snapshots of the same phenomenon from different vantage points. This achievement is remarkable because it draws attention to the enormous complexity inherent to the issues under examination. Identity and nationalism, sovereignty and statehood, idiosyncrasies of gender, race, ethnicity and community in a multicultural society are historically contingent, fluid, and contradictory. The Cuban case is a history of a thwarted nation building between late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was a process of nation construction set amidst a daunting struggle for independence from Spanish colonialism and U.S. imperialistic interventions. The 1959 revolution further hampered completion and crystallization of a homogeneous and unifying concept of nationness of *la patria*, the fatherland, when it created a dual Cuban nation, the diasporic nation and the island nation. This is the context against which the essayists express and

articulate their feelings of incompleteness, lack of accomplishment, unbearable angst, and the awkwardness of a divided existence. *Cuba, the Elusive Nation* is a valuable book

and all the essays will be of interest to Cuban specialists, and to all those concerned with the processes of identity construction, nationalism and exile.