



**A Howl to the Heavens:
Art in the Life of First- and Second-Generation Cuban Americans**

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CUBAN AMERICANS

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Introduction

In a recent review of Phillip Roth's prolific contribution to American Literature, a critic observes about the central character in his most notorious book, that Alexander Portnoy's onanistic hold to the flesh is "literally, in rebellion against the life that is being forced upon him . . . A fiercely comic shtick that is also a howl to the heavens."¹ The same may be said about much of art and, especially, about art as cultivated by first- and second generation immigrants in the United States.

Even under auspicious circumstances, immigrants and exiles face dislocation, loss of personal and collective identities, and occasional hostility from those whom they come in contact with in their adopted countries. Many, unable to communicate for lack of linguistic skills or familiarity with cultural mores, fall back on symbolic repertoires to assuage anxieties and restore comfort. One of those reserves is religion; the other one is art and the connection between the two is not haphazard. Both faith and aesthetic expression rely on universal means that transcend language barriers and insular practices. They entail the promise of connection beyond temporal divides. In that sense, they are as visceral as a shout or a prayer.

This paper focuses on the relationship between aesthetic expression and immigrant incorporation. I ask, what is the role of art in the adaptation of newcomers facing often harsh environments in the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the New Millennium? How does music, dance, and the figurative arts define and are defined by the quest for national and ethnic distinctiveness? How do first- and second-generation

¹ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "The Great Enemy: Philip Roth's New Novel." *The New Yorker*, May 1, 2006: 82.

expressions differ, and what do those differences reveal about modes of incorporation, types of reception, and structures of opportunity in the host country?

Although the importance of these questions is obvious as soon as they are formulated, mine is among the first attempts to address them. Earlier omissions are especially puzzling given the enduring significance of art as an element of the human experience and the richness of artistic manifestations in immigrant communities. It may be a testimony to the supremacy of market-economics thinking that there are many more treatises about immigrant employment and exploitation than about the way immigrants use art to combat severe conditions in the labor market.

This paper is partly based on information collected as part of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey (CILS), the most extensive investigation of the New Second Generation in the United States.² For more than a decade that project has followed a national sample of immigrants from early adolescence to young adulthood. By combining survey and ethnographic research, it has amassed the largest data base available for the understanding of immigrant incorporation in the U.S. in the latter part of the 20th century. Although CILS did not focus directly on artistic expression, that subject has spontaneously emerged in interviews with members of the original sample. I rely on them, my own ethnographic research, and a profuse literature on the arts to develop an interpretive framework. Given its exploratory character, I see this paper as the first step in a continuing investigation on the subject.

² Led by Principal Investigators Alejandro Portes (Princeton University) and Ruben Rumbaut (University of California, Irvine) the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey began in 1993 and continues to the present. A sample formed by more than 5000 youngsters evenly divided between San Diego and Miami-Dade Counties were repeatedly interviewed over the years on matters of education, immigrant background, family composition, work-related aspirations, ethnic identity, etc. The survey has been complemented by a series of ethnographic modules, several of which I have conducted in collaboration with Liza Konczal (Barry University) and William Haller (Clemson University).

My argument is divided into three segments To begin with I claim that artistic expressions among first-generation immigrants trace historical and cultural arrangements from the country of origin to affirm national pride in places of destination. They also depend on shared agreements about the value of creativity to connect with the receiving society. In the case of Cubans, the majority of whom first arrived in the United States as exiles; artistic creation entails a reinvention of the county of origin and the forging of a *culture of nostalgia* that strengthens co-ethnic bonds, separating insiders from outsiders. In other words, the art of first-generation Cubans—like equivalent manifestations by recent immigrants from other places—asserts distinctiveness even as it uses aesthetic empathy to establish roots in the adopted country. It is in this sense that art, especially music, becomes a universal language creating bridges between newcomers and their host environment.

Second, immigrant children and the children of immigrants face circumstances dissimilar from those confronted by their forebears and, as a result, their artistic tastes diverge from those cultivated by the first generation. Having grown up in America they do not possess their parents' close connection to or deep understanding of the country of origin. Some feel an impulse to re-learn ancestral traditions by way of preserving cultural identity. Others embrace the mores and art of youth groups in the new nation. The two trends are not mutually exclusive—they frequently merge giving way to surprising new manifestations. Both tendencies can also vary in terms of class with more affluent populations seeking elements of authenticity and cultural purity in the expressions of sending countries and more humble groups resorting to forms that mix ethnic and American modalities or adopting distinctly American forms. Especially informative in that respect is the popularity of Hip-Hop among members of the New Second Generation,

including those living in the City of Hialeah, a Miami district with the largest concentration of working-class Cubans. When they appropriate art forms originally created by African Americans to convey rebellion, vitality and endurance, Cuban youngsters symbolically unite with them and with a multitude of others sharing comparable experiences throughout the world. Immigrant art thus becomes an instrument for vindicating tarnished identities and rejecting the homogenizing pressures of the larger society.

Finally, at the beginning of the New Millennium a new relationship is being forged between changing structures of opportunity and aesthetic expression. In a recent article written with Lisa Konczal (2005), I introduced the term *expressive entrepreneurship* to designate the propensity of second-generation immigrants to use art and art-like ventures as an instrument to circumvent the limitations of labor markets. Whether they are affluent or not, immigrant children take for granted a measure of prosperity. Their parents have toiled hard to provide them children with more than basic survival—they, in turn, measure success in accordance with the normative standards and aspirations of the host society. As a result, independence, wealth, and even fame feature prominently in the dreams of immigrant children. Their aim is to craft a meaningful life where employment is but a means to an end. Expressive entrepreneurship is part of that quest. Although it is present among affluent youngsters, it takes urgent proportions amid working-class immigrants who face limited opportunities in the post-industrial age. At a time, when desirable jobs require high levels of education and formal skills that many do not have or cannot afford, immigrant youngsters are turning to the arts as a path to success

The paper is divided into four parts. In the first section I give attention to a small number of theoretical issues concerning artistic production in general and immigrant art in

particular. I then discuss Cuban exiles, many of whom have forged an impressive artistic emporium in Miami. Subsequently, I shift attention to the second-generation, especially youngsters living in the City of Hialeah. It is in that location, fraught with torn sentiments about what it means to be Cuban American, that Hip-Hop flourishes. I give emphasis to expressive entrepreneurship as part and parcel of immigrant's aesthetic efforts and as an element in their adaptation. Finally, in the concluding section, I recapitulate the argument and discuss its implications for a better understanding of immigrant integration. Although the focus of this paper is on Cubans I maintain that its insights can be generalized to other immigrant communities.

Sociology and Art: A Minimalist Perspective

The remarkable Clifford Geertz (1973) notes in his most famous article that we are beings suspended in “webs of meaning.” To be human is to be irretrievably dependent on signs, symbols, and metaphors without which social interaction would be impossible. For more than three decades Geertz's semiotic approach to culture has inspired anthropologists, sociologists and historians but most of their work has not focused on art. Yet it is in aesthetic expression that meaning-making, the core of Geertz's formulation; is anchored. The invention of music, dance, sculpture, and painting signals the debut of humankind in the true sense of the term, that is, its differentiation from other species through the production of significant forms, consciously achieved by altering the enfolding environment. Art and language are thus indivisible and embedded in the human attempt to make sense of natural and constructed surroundings.

Yet meaning-making has never been a straightforward proposition. Two intellectual traditions are relevant in that respect. The first one, derived from the writings of philosophers like Immanuel Kant and later thinkers like Sigmund Freud, yields a vision of art as a vehicle to assuage anxieties and recover transcendence. The second follows the insights of Karl Marx, focusing on the relationship between art and labor. Below, I briefly describe the two trends as a way to situate immigrant expressions.

Leaving aside the lasting contributions of Greek philosophers like Aristotle—who understood art as the ultimate manifestation of moral sense—or Caton—for whom art was inseparable from politics—the first modern of consequence to have written extensively about art was the founder of the liberal tradition in aesthetics, Immanuel Kant (1790). From his perspective, Western Civilization brings about the differentiation of the self and pleasure derived from the production and viewing of beautiful objects. Artistic manifestations thus require specific cultural conditions derived from class privilege. Deeply imbued with ethnocentric bias, Kant’s approach traces an evolution between art as an instrument of magic and art as an independent phenomenon buttressed by new notions of freedom, refinement, and genius (Kemal 1991). It ceases to be a guard against cosmic chaos to become a source of contentment for those with superior faculties. Kant’s ideas resonate in the modern world of immigrants to the extent that they use aesthetic tastes and production to mark a distinct and cultivated self definition. First-generation Cubans, for example depend of their taste for the opera, ballet, and theater to affirm a superior class position.

Similarly, after they cross physical and social borders, immigrants use art to signify physical and idealized terrains. Relevant to understand their gestures is the work of Mircea

Eliade (1954), the Rumanian scholar who became best known for his work on the history of religions. By borrowing from Immanuel Kant (1790) and Max Otto (1917) he draws a distinction between *the sacred and the profane*, arguing that such a demarcation is part of the human condition. Central to religious practice it is also present in aesthetic creation. In its most exalted form art is production bereft of ordinary intent; it divides the world of bodily needs and the world of expression solely for the sake of expression. That separation acquires special meaning among immigrants and exiles who must continuously separate activities meant to garner survival from those that make them honorable and visibly human in places of destination. The capacity for aesthetic appreciation diminishes their alien character.

Also written in the Kantian tradition, Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) is a compelling treatise bringing together philosophical ideas and the new science of psychology. Culture, argues Freud, is a response to finitude. Lost in an indifferent universe and aware of their own mortality, humans are compelled to channel anguish into meaning. Fear ushers in neurosis, which, in Freud's scheme, is the basis of civilized living. For that reason, it is possible to see art as a privileged form of neurosis where the analyst or critic excavates the creator's psychological motivations (Glover 2006). Nevertheless, that approach is limited. Art is more productively understood as the outcome of a process. Recent views inspired by Freud's work envision art not only as a biographical expression but as a cultural reserve embedded in social relations. Freud's contribution endures because it sheds light on the irrational elements of the creative process. As illustrated by the following sections, it also allows for a fuller comprehension of immigrant

art, which usually emerges in response to pressing needs for self-identification under anxiety-producing conditions.

Equally thought provoking are interpretations emerging from the writings of Karl Marx, especially his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) and *The German Ideology* (1845). In those works, he lays down the basis for an understanding of art as a superior form of labor. As they cooperate to insure collective survival, people enter into specific relations of production, which once established, cannot be easily undone. Social development gives way to multiple versions of inequality that depend on the exercise of violence, coercion, and cooptation. It is through those means that ruling classes control the subaltern majorities and appropriate their labor. Under Capitalism, the realization of profit requires not only the subjugation of workers but also the expansion of markets and, therefore, an uninterrupted increase in the scale and complexity of labor exploitation. Transformed into cogs of a depersonalized system, workers are ripped apart from the product of their own creation. Alienated labor thus becomes the trademark of modern society.

Yet Marx envisions a higher state of being where labor would recover its wholesome character. This is a vision of labor as the fulfillment of the human capacity to create. In a non-exploitative society work would fuse with art. Pleasure and aesthetic value would replace the debased world forged under exploitative conditions of production. Art, in fact, would be coterminous with existence and no difference would exist between production and expressivity. This utopian rendition, infrequently included in Marxian exegeses, opens up a fertile ground for the understanding of artistic expressions among

populations, like those formed by second-generation immigrants, whose aim is to circumvent the deadening effects of low-skill employment.

Marx's ideas inspired a multitude of writers, including Walter Benjamin who explored the relation between technology, commodity production and creativity (1936) and John Berger, the novelist, painter, and critic who examines art both as an embodiment of exchange value and as a reflection of social yearnings for emancipation (1972). Even more recently, Pierre Bourdieu (1979) draws on and critiques Marxian ideas to explain how aesthetic preferences influence and are influenced by class privilege. Yet it was Herbert Marcuse who most thoroughly theorized the relationship between productive work and art, joining the insights of Freud and Marx. In *Eros and Civilization* (1958) he too describes an ideal society buttressed by beauty, sensuality and play, in contrast to modern social arrangements founded on reason, production and repression.

Marcuse borrows from Freud to argue that humans are driven by two opposing and equally destructive forces—*eros*, the life instinct and *tanathos*, the compulsion to self-destroy. People develop constraint as a means to survive individually and collectively, harnessing libidinal impulses and channeling them into work. Repression, renunciation, and delay create a full array of needs that are only partially met through market production. Now, drawing from Marxian writings, Marcuse claims that humanity will achieve a higher state when art, not labor, becomes the organizing social force. Purposiveness without purpose and lawfulness without the law are central to his aesthetic model. Objects will not be judged by their practical uses alone but also as pure forms free from property relations. Marcuse's imagined society may seem unattainable but his insights have had lasting

influence, casting light upon the tensions between creativity, the maintenance of social order, and the demands of the market.

From Kant to Freud and from Marx to Marcuse a framework, anchored by two central ideas, emerges to enable a better comprehension of immigrant art. First, aesthetic expressions concretize and diffuse existential uncertainties and anxieties common among those who cross real and imaginary borders. Second, art may be helpfully conceived as a form of labor in ambivalent relationship with market production. In that respect, immigrants and their art configure what Robert K. Merton would call a ‘strategic research site’—they vividly reveal elements of life less apparent in more settled populations thus enabling the observation and evaluation of creative processes that have general interest.

Leaving behind familiar customs and environments, immigrants are thrust into milieus where they confront new challenges. Dislocation is followed by the need to comprehend or at least manage elusive cultural norms. “Learning the ropes” entails a potential for anomie. The need to survive through employment or business formation limits the capacity for idle enjoyment. Practical ends threaten to overwhelm romantic ideals. It is perhaps because of those tensions that art is so rich in immigrant communities. In the next section I sketch the experience of first-generation Cubans, a population whose aesthetic preferences would have brought a smile of recognition to the faces of the theoreticians discussed above.

Art and Diaspora in the First Generation

Among the most popular ballads in Cuban Miami is *Contigo en la Distancia*, written by César Portillo De La Luz who was born in Havana in 1922. Perhaps the most distinguished lyricist of his generation, Portillo de la Luz is responsible for a veritable trove of melodic jewels. Like many others, *Contigo en la Distancia* is a love song but it may also be read as an expression of longing for a country lost to Fidel Castro's revolution. His victory coincided with the abrupt departure of nearly one million Cubans, most of whom found refuge in Miami. Later waves have replenished the vibrant community right up to the present. More than forty years after the first arrivals, Cubans in the U.S. still see Castro as the cause of their expulsion from paradise. "Not a moment goes by when I can bear to be away from you," wrote Portillo de la Luz, "the world seems strange without you by my side. Beyond . . . the sun and the stars, in spite of distance, I am always with you, my beloved."³ Those are fitting words to describe the sentiments of far between sweethearts but also those of exiles whose success in the adopted country has never alleviated the yearnings of the soul.

The story of Cubans in exile has been aptly recounted before (Portes and Stepick 1994) and, therefore, only a bare sketch is needed here to situate the artistic tastes and expressions of the first generation. Two aspects are worth mentioning:

First, Cubans are responsible for the speediest success story in the history of immigration to the United States. It took the Irish three generations to take control of Tammany Hall. Cubans placed a heavily accented Xavier Suárez in Miami's mayoral seat and three other compatriots in the U.S. Senate or in the House of Representatives within the

³ No existe un momento del día en que pueda apartarte de mí. El mundo parece distinto cuando no estás junto a mí. Más allá . . . del sol y las estrellas, contigo en la distancia, amada mía estoy.

first generation. In less than thirty years Cubans transformed Miami from a provincial resort town into the gateway to the Americas, invigorating its economy and taking over its political structure. Such a precipitous ascent was partly the result of shared cultural norms that prioritized determination, achievement, and family loyalty but it was also the effect of sound U.S. government policies. As ‘freedom fighters’ escaping a Communist regime, Cubans promptly received naturalized status as well as educational and economic incentives that eased their incorporation into the host society. For example, between 1961 and 1973 nearly 50 percent of all loans issued by the Small Business Administration in the State of Florida went to Cubans (Light 1995; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1980: 546). In tandem with their knowledge of American culture, citizenship and employment incentives enabled Cubans to form a business enclave of almost unprecedented dimensions and vitality (Portes and Zhou 1996). Even today the Cuban community continues to exhibit a rate of entrepreneurship and business formation that surpasses the national average.

Second, Cuban success was also buttressed by narratives that focused on solidarity brought about by the common experience of exile. A ferocious denunciation of Fidel Castro and his perceived betrayal of the nation shaped a hegemonic discourse repeated without cessation by a few Cuban-owned radio stations. For nearly four decades, *La Cubanísima* (WQBA), *La Poderosa* (WWFE) and, more recently, *Radio Mambí*, also known as *La Grande*, (WAQI) have transmitted and given shape to a totalizing world view shared by almost every Cuban in South Florida. Most powerful has been the influence of Armando Pérez Roura, Radio Mambí’s, executive director, whose voice is heard on a daily basis recounting Castro’s real and imagined crimes. According to that station’s mission statement, he regularly writes or participates in newscasts, commentaries, open microphone

programs, and radio editorials meant to “remember every day the names of victims who have disappeared or been murdered by Fidel Castro’s dictatorship.” Comparatively young and vigorous, Pérez Roura reigns supreme at the helm of the Spanish-speaking station with the largest listening audience in South Florida. He is the proud representative of Cuban *intransigencia*—in his world view, as in that of his compatriots, intolerance and rancor are virtues that keep unifying memories alive.

When Pérez Roura is not expatiating against Castro and Communism, he is likely to be introducing the songs and culture of his beloved country. In that, he is not alone—other radio stations, newspapers, and TV channels do the same. Fervid political commentary alternates with poetic and musical offerings plucked from Cuba’s rich tradition. Although the island is but a speck in the ocean, its contributions to the world of art are legion. Before and after the Revolution, personalities like Alicia Alonso, Ernesto Lecuona, Bola de Nieve, Benny More, Celia Cruz, and Olga Guillot acquired an international reputation. In today’s Miami, they are invoked as the representatives of a classical era defined by romance, chivalry and grace. Forgotten, for the most part, are the gross inequalities, authoritarian politics, and racial discord that first led Castro to the *Sierra Maestra* in the spirit of insurrection. The old Cuba is remembered as an idealized country whose capital City, Havana, rivaled Paris in architectural beauty and whose level of civilized living matched that of European countries.

The day by day repetition of tales of cruelty perpetrated by Fidel Castro and his followers as well as the remembrance of the stolen nation have forged strong ties among Cuban exiles and between them and their children, cementing what Portes (1998) calls ‘bounded solidarity.’ That process has also frozen time—like Sleeping Beauty, the Cuban

community lives suspended between a re-imagined past and a future that awaits fulfillment (Rieff 1994). . It is as part of the culture of nostalgia that a rich artistic life exists in Miami. It's most important feature is continuity. The artistic preferences of the Cuban first generation are marked by *cultural linearity*. Below, I give attention to those genres whose main function has been to recast national pride and identity.

It is perhaps in comedy and drama that the continuous character of Cuban culture is best manifested. Banter, especially the kind that gives way to loud laughter in the interest of self-deprecation, has always been a quality of interaction in the island and in Miami. In both places levity is highly valued. The term *pesado*, bore or stiff carries a strong pejorative connotation. The thinking is that by laughing at oneself or at one's situation, hurt can be muted. To use humor when pointing to personal misfortune is thus considered a brand of nobility by contrast to self pity which betrays weakness.

As with its Jewish counterpart, Cuban humor is a way to assuage pain or disappointment—an ironic vehicle for restoring order. For that reason it lives on in South Florida where the voices of the two greats of Cuban comedy, the late Leopoldo Fernández (better known as *Trespatines*) and Guillermo Álvarez-Guedes can still be heard in theaters and radio broadcasts. *Trespatines* is to Cuban folk art what *Cantinflas* was to Mexico and Charlie Chaplin to the United States, an *everyman* confronting adversity through endurance and wit. Famous throughout Latin America Fernández and Álvarez-Guedes have defined more than half a century of Cuban-American *burla* and *choteo*, terms akin to *mockery* and *ridicule*. In their image, many lesser figures continue to entertain the children of exiles. Among them are Salvador Ugarte and Alfonso Cremata, best known for hilarious theater work poking fun at all aspects of life in exile. There are also actors like Salvador Blanco,

Armando Roblán, Aleida Leal, Marta Picanes, Eddie Calderón and Carmen Peláez who regularly give life to comedic characters whose roots go back to 16th century Spanish literature.

Away from the judgmental gazes of American society, older exiles and their families still frequent theaters like *Las Máscaras* located in Little Havana where comedies or *zainetes* are performed. With a long history and reminiscent of genres begotten by other national groups, the *zainete* is a theatrical play that builds upon confusion and double entendre to make audiences laugh. It bears a likeness to vaudeville. Hapless patriarchs, devious wives, and wise homosexuals are often featured in scripts that build on the news of the day. In Miami, plots often involve an upturning of the grievous realities that caused Cubans to leave their country. Fidel Castro is the butt of many jokes but so are the newly arrived refugees escaping his hold and even the older Cubans now living in Miami. The theatre is about the only place in which self-parody is possible for the benefit of a group that approaches political matters with deadening gravity. Always written and performed in Spanish such productions are home grown, created by grassroots playwrights and featuring local actors. Although the genre is fading, it attests to the power of Cuban endurance and humor.

Also a mark of cultural continuity among the educated classes is the Cuban predilection for classical ballet, whose iconic figure is Alicia Alonso. Born in 1921, Alonso is still considered the nation's premier dancer. As a girl growing up in Havana she was impressed with Isadora Duncan's innovative motions (Martin Arnold 1993). She wanted to have long hair to see it float when her body stretched and leaped. Her father, a prominent military man, took Alicia to Spain so that she could be exposed to the art of the

motherland whose traditions had so significantly influenced Cuba. Endowed with superior capacities, Alonso grew up to become a world class diva. She also became an entrepreneur founding the Ballet Alicia Alonso in Havana in 1948 and then renaming it the National ballet of Cuba in 1959, when it received official state backing. Alonso was also a key player in what would become the American Ballet Theatre and the New York City Ballet. She starred in Broadway musicals with Ethel Merman, learned *Les Sylphides* from Mikhail Fokine himself and was the inspiration for masterpieces by George Balanchine and Antony Tudor. She was extensively praised for her performance of Giselle. Followed by fame and fortune, Alonso and her company traveled widely. Even in Miami, where she faced hostility for her bonds with the Cuban government, Alonso represents some of the values that unite Cubans despite political divisions: achievement, sophistication, and creativity.

Beyond its contributions to classical dance, Alonso's troupe is important for another reason—throughout the years it has been a source of defections by those eager to flee the island. Interviewed by Octavio Roca, Alonso dismissed his probes on this matter by saying about the latest five absconders, "I don't think it is worth commenting on them." That response was disingenuous. The escapes sucking talent away from her company have been going on for nearly half a century. Only in 2003, twenty Cuban ballet dancers fled while performing in New York. Some of Alonso's students and former associates have opened lucrative schools in Miami where children are taught the basics of an art cultivated now as in the past by Cuban families of means. To learn ballet in Miami is more than a hobby, it is also a class entitlement, a way to mark superior breeding. In fashionable districts, like Coral Gables and South Beach, the passer by can often steal a glimpse through studio

showcase windows of little girls in tights and tutus reproducing the plies and pirouettes of classical ballet, an inheritance made partly possible by Alicia Alonso.

Classical ballet is not the only genre anchoring class supremacy in Miami. The success of operatic figures like Blanca Varela, Marta Perez, and Miguel Le Grande attest to the presence of a public willing to support high cultural expressions. Their repertory transcends popular offerings from Europe to include the works of co-nationals like Ernesto Lecuona, perhaps the island's greatest musician of all time. Known as "The Cuban Gershwin" he was a child prodigy who grew up to become a piano virtuoso and composer (Sublette 2004). His most famous work, "Malagueña," is part of a Spanish Suite heard throughout the world many times over. *Maria La O*, Lecuona's best known operetta or *zarzuela* is often produced in Miami. It blends elements derived from African and Spanish traditions into remarkable melodic innovations to tell the melodramatic story of a humble woman rising above adversity.

Equally enticing is the singspiel Cubano *Cecilia Valdés*, written by Gonzalo Roig in 1932 and filled with infectious folk rhythms and dances. Set in 1830, it tells the story of Cecilia, a beautiful mulatto woman, in love with an aristocratic white student unaware that he is her half-brother. Cecilia, in turn, is loved by a black musician. The tragic love triangle is mainly a vehicle to expose racial and sexual contradictions born out of a colonial past. Seduced and betrayed, Cecilia is a thinly veiled metaphor of the Cuban *pueblo*, the people, always infatuated with Europe and blind to the beauty of its mixed heritage. Events develop along familiarly macabre lines but, although the story ends badly, it stands in the Cuban imaginary as a hybrid representation of African and Spanish traditions. In Miami it is also a link to the past and an expression of cultural continuity.

Such displays of artistry as the ones sketched above are not surprising. Cuba has a long history of musical accomplishment (Carpentier and Brennan 2002; Moore 2006). Even in the late 18th century, the Baroque composer Esteban Salas gained esteem beyond the island's borders. In the 19th century other musical writers did the same, including Robredo Manuel, an innovator who transformed the *contradanza* into a modern genre, Laureano Fuentes who wrote the opera, *Selia*, Gaspar Villette who successfully toured Europe, and Jose White, a mulatto of half-Haitian origin who became a violinist and composer of merit. It was Ignacio Cervantes, however, who advanced a musical sense of nationalism in Cuba. He studied at the Paris Conservatoire under the famous Marmontel, Ruiz Espadero and Gotschalk. His compositions incorporated Afro-Cuban and *guajiro* (peasant) traditions and led Aaron Copeland to describe him as the Cuban Chopin. Other exponents of *Afrocubanismo* included Alejandro Caturla and Amadeo Roldán, whose works continue to be produced in the United States. Roldán's operetta, *La Rebambaramba* is one of the finest exponents of Afro-Cuban classicism. Based on a scenario by Alejo Carpentier, it depicts Havana's low-life on the Day of Epiphany in 1830. Roldán was the leading musical figure of his day. As a composer, he was the first to bring Afro-Cuban music to the concert hall and among the first to create works for percussion only.

After the Cuban Revolution, a new wave of classical musicians emerged, the most important of whom may be Leo Brouwer who became director of the Havana Symphonic Orchestra and whose significant innovations in classical guitar influenced and consolidated the Nueva Trova movement (Moore 2006). Pablo Milanés is the best known figure in that highly regarded trend, whose melodies use classical means to recast folk and political themes. Hybridity of all kinds marks Cuban art both in the island and in the United States.

Although critics would never acknowledge it, the Cuban Revolution brought about a new era of respect for popular education in the island. Together with the development of a topnotch health system, education—including artistic training—has been the highest priority under Castro’s regime. Such advances have had unintended consequences. Most significant has been the emergence of a new generation endowed with superior abilities but also the ambition to use them in the pursuit of prosperity and success. The lack of individual freedoms and economic opportunity has driven many young artists to defect. Ironically, they are at once Cuba’s ‘brain drain’ and living evidence of Castro’s revolutionary success. Cuba’s loss has been South Florida’s gain. For almost two decades, Miami has been flooded by classical and popular musicians who, having received superior instruction in their home country, now perform in local nightclubs and theaters. In recent years the most famous of those performers has been Albita Rodriguez, whose personal story tells much about the invisible bridges that unite the island and its American counterpart.

Albita was born into music, in 1965, the daughter of well known Cuban performers. By the age of 19 she was a personality on national television. In 1991 she was offered a major recording contract to work in Colombia and received permission from the government to travel to South America. After several junkets through the continent, she finally broke away. Casually, she walked across the bridge separating Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. Her action was described by a Miami journalist as a bucket of ice water falling on Fidel Castro’s head. A political renegade in tailored suits and slicked-back hair, Albita became an instant sensation as soon as she arrived in Miami in 1993. She rekindled the passion of the exile community with music steeped in the rhythms of the

Afro-Cuban tradition. On stage, she projects an androgynous image and is credited for reviving styles that had gone out of fashion before she was born, giving a contemporary twist to *guajiras* and *sones*.

Albita's persona is emblematic of a new Miami current. She simultaneously represents cultural linearity and fracture. Her credibility among exiles is bolstered by her political defection and her loving rendition of the music of the past. She is, in that sense, part of the culture of nostalgia. On the other hand, her sexualized profile and homoerotic insinuations place her in a new post-modern realm. She transforms the expectations of audiences by dispensing with the familiar features of Caribbean exoticism and folkloric banality. Instead, she offers an ambiguous portrayal that is as Cuban as it is American but neither of the two. Her kind of fusion dissolves national boundaries while affirming them. It is therefore no wonder that Albita's packed performances at Little Havana's *Centro Vasco* have attracted a sophisticated following of South Beach club hoppers, and jet-setters, including Hollywood celebrities and international couturiers. In 1994, Albita signed a contract for the Epic-distributed Crescent Moon label originally created by Emilio and Gloria Estefan, the entrepreneurs whose mission has been to turn Miami into the Motown of Latin Sound.

Gloria Estefan deserves special mention. Her spectacular success and crossover appeal stand as emblems of the Cuban ability to assimilate through art and entrepreneurship while still preserving the elements of alien distinctiveness. She was born in Havana in 1957 and grew up in Miami to become a five-time Grammy Award winner for her singing and songwriting. A young woman of diminutive height she began her career in 1975 as a lead vocalist for the *Miami Sound Machine*, a band aptly named for its versatile focus on a

comprehensive artistic experience. Dance, as well as music and singing made for an overwhelming immersion in feeling. Performances blended Spanish and English shaping a combined expression of broad appeal. By the 1980s, Estefan and her husband and manager, Emilio, had developed a potent artistic emporium known both nationally and internationally. With hit singles like *Dr. Beat* (1984) and *Conga* (1986), Gloria Estefan entered the pantheon of enduring innovation. *Conga*, in particular—whose infectious Afro-Cuban rhythms were heard repeatedly for nearly two years almost everywhere in the U.S.—represents both the capacity of Cubans to communicate beyond ethnic or national boundaries and the receptive potential of American society whose culture continues to be replenished by immigrant inventiveness.

Finally, Cuban Americans have also made a contribution to the figurative arts (Bosch 2004; Libby and Martinez 2006). Sponsored by the Sociedad Pro Arte Grateli—a well endowed foundation whose mission is to foment aesthetic expression—notable masters have regularly exhibited their work in Miami galleries. Among them are Eduardo Abela, Amelia Peláez, Cervando Cabrera Moreno, Victor Manuel and the internationally recognized Wilfredo Lam. But perhaps the best known painter of the Cuban Diaspora is Humberto Calzada whose melancholy depictions of architectural structures—columns, pediments, lintels, stained-glass windows, and doors opening up to bodies of water leading nowhere—have attracted interest in wide circles. He was born in Havana in 1944 and it was there that he began his education. Leaving the island with his family in 1960, he completed high school in Miami, later studying industrial engineering and finance at a local university. In 1975 he became a full-time artist. His taste gravitates towards pastel-colored interiors and exteriors bathed in an even lighting that imparts an impression of classic

stability. None of his paintings feature people or animals. His spaces are dormant, expectant, unfilled. Typical of Calzada's style is "La Espera", an idyllic rendition depicting the portal of a typical Cuban home. Elegant, empty, and silent, it is the evocation of a vanished world that perhaps exists only in the mind of exiles.

In their aesthetic preferences and production first-generation Cubans perpetuate cultural and class-based ideals. Their art connects with the past even as it communicates with and becomes part of American society. The anxieties of dislocation are given shape in works that affirm a cultivated spirit. They embody the yearning for refinement and civilization that Kant and his followers would have predicted. But educated Cubans are not the only ones creating beauty in Miami. In the next section I turn to the children of the Diaspora, many of whom take to the streets in their search for artistic expression.

Art among Second-Generation Cubans⁴

Below I use the experience of two pictorial artists—Dennis Martinez from Hialeah and Xavier Cortada from Little Havana—to illustrate a common phenomenon among working-class Cubans who have grown up in the United States. Both are members of the second generation and, in their separate styles and degree of success they represent a tendency towards *expressive entrepreneurship*, an attempt to circumvent the limitations of nine-to-five jobs and a way to imprint with meaning an otherwise uncertain existence. While Martinez is in the early stages of his quest, experimenting with graffiti and attempting to transform the streets into a canvas, Cortada has already become an international muralist of repute. One has a high-school education and is currently studying

⁴ Part of this section appears in Fernández-Kelly and Konczal, 2005.

graphic arts at a Fort Lauderdale institute. The other holds two professional degrees, one in the field of law.

Through their art, Martinez and Cortada seek either to evade the common fate of youngsters with limited means and education, or use their talent to achieve more than a prosperous life. Their yearning is for financial independence but also for significance and transcendence. Their creative work salvages elements familiar to the utopian longings of Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse. By turning aesthetic expression into a superior form of labor they reject common expectations even as they seek to surpass them. In both cases, racial and ethnic self definitions find a way into their paintings; both are subjects that I discuss below.

In the United States, race and ethnicity play a salient role as vectors shaping the collective identity of second generation immigrants. In general, Cubans in Miami have a vague notion of discrimination and its leveling effects. Discrimination is unthinkable for many given their economic success and social mobility—Cubans display high rates of intermarriage with members of other ethnic groups, including Anglo Americans. In Miami, they also benefit from the “Cuban bubble effect” that protects most exiles and their children from external hostility. More than a million strong the Cuban community in Miami stands like a fortress shielding insiders who are often oblivious to the prejudice outsiders. It is difficult for Cubans to feel socially excluded when most of the people they interact with are members of their own group.

Exempted from that generalization are Cubans who entered the U.S. after 1980, the year of the Mariel Boatlift. The cleavage between pre- and post-Mariel arrivals is deeply rooted in local culture, with older Cubans self-defining as politically untainted and those in

more recent waves being tagged as economic opportunists unfairly partaking of the success forged by earlier members of the Diaspora. Urban space divides along those lines with the City of Hialeah, a residential district in Miami-Dade County, emerging in the collective mind as the redoubt of politically suspect refugees—the infamous "refs" of popular parlance. Cubans like Magali Bardens, who lives with her daughter Edwina on Hialeah's 63rd Street, make repeated reference to the moral chasm between older and recent arrivals.⁵ Outrage tints her voice as she declares, "I didn't come to [the United States] to gain material wealth but to stand on the side of freedom!" Echoes Adelia Martínez, whose husband spent several years in a Cuban prison for his political dissidence, "I came to Miami after being raped—Yes! Fidel [Castro] violated me and my family. I am now living a second exile in Hialeah." Almost universal is the perception that Cubans who grew up under Castro are less likely to value hard work and more inclined to hold feelings of entitlement. Hialeah exposes the hidden underbelly of the Cuban success story.

As a result, young people in Hialeah say they experience discrimination almost every day. The sources of prejudice, however, are not native-born Americans but more educated and wealthier Cubans living in relative proximity. A case in point is Dennis Martinez who is 25 years old and lives with his parents on 45th Street.⁶ His father migrated from Cuba to the United States in 1981 after serving an eight-year sentence for opposing Fidel Castro. Since then he has worked mostly in construction and now owns his own business. The house where the family lives is vintage Hialeah—a one story brick structure with windows protected by iron bars. The Star-Spangled Banner is prominently displayed at the entrance as a testimony of devotion to the adopted country. The front door opens

⁵ The names of individuals in this section are fictitious unless otherwise noted.

⁶ I use the real name of Dennis Martinez with his permission.

directly into a living room dotted with chairs in golden armatures and upholstered in red brocade. A console serves as pedestal for a sculpture of *Santa Bárbara Bendita* or Changó as the Catholic saint is known among the practitioners of *Santería*, the Afro-Cuban religion favored by working-class Cubans despite their fair complexion and undiluted Spanish ancestry. Mr. Martinez is one of those votaries.

His illustrates a distinctive Hialeah experience—that of people who have endured and overcome daunting troubles on behalf of their children but who face dramatic isolation in their adopted country. There is a vast distance between Dennis’ experience and that of his mother and father, but his parents don’t know it. "Me and my brother," says Dennis, "we wanted to make it in this country but we didn't have a lot of guidance. We had to invent new ways to adapt." He seeks to emulate his father in one way; to succeed through self-employment. "I've learned a lot from my dad and his business," he remarks, "but I want more, a lot more—I want to revolutionize everything I touch."

When Dennis was younger, his family moved repeatedly, always into low-income neighborhoods. As a result, he attended a string of "really bad" schools. By the sixth grade he knew kids who were already "out, mugging people." But it was the following year that he began to fully appreciate the "dark side of what public school really is." On the first day of classes he was appalled by the cage-like windows, security guards in every corner, and doors locked and "barricaded." He saw kids getting their "chains" snatched, found knives hidden in benches, and stepped over syringes while walking in the yard. It was also during that time that Dennis had his first taste of racial discord; he saw Hispanics and blacks confronting one another. His memories are laden with regret: "going to school meant that you were always afraid—even your sneakers, you had to defend." Studying came second to

worrying about rival gangs. He persisted, however, and graduated with a GPA good enough to be admitted at a Fort Lauderdale graphic design school.

Most of Dennis' friends weren't so lucky; they dropped out and were stuck "holding their ground" on the street in a futile search for respect. They survive by hustling, that is, "flipping anything you can into money." Dennis seldom hustles but he sees beauty in the ways of the street. His friends are the lone rangers of urban survival. For that reason, he despairs that outsiders, "fakers and posers," have turned street culture into a fashion. "There's rich boys out there," he notes, "who have their lives covered and still are fronting *golds* and claiming gangs . . . Those automatically have beef with inner cities and kids who don't have the money." According to Dennis, they make hollow what was intended to be real.

Dennis, who is as white as they come, says that he feels hostility every day because of the way he dresses and speaks. "When I was about 21," he explains,

I went to apply for a job and I say to the guy, 'yo, wassup! He took that as disrespect [and] degraded me saying, 'what kinda way is that for a first impression?' He mocked me. So what does it matter if I don't speak like you? I can probably do the job better than you ever could! So I walked out [because] I wanna be hired for what I do, not the way I look.

For almost three years Dennis worked as a clerk at Security Mart, a store in the Westland Shopping Mall where he created commercial signs because, as he puts it, "I have graphic art in my blood." Although the job paid a paltry hourly wage, it allowed him to support himself while pursuing his real passion: graffiti art. Dennis hopes to turn creativity into a business. In 2002 he and six of his crewmembers (one female) set out to turn the

streets into a colorful representation of their ideal world. They wanted to take aesthetics to a new level. "Graffiti," says Dennis, "is a way to, how should I put it? Murder the alphabet, bringing about a new order where people are valued for who they are not just what they do." He aims to take signs and symbols "off the wall, where we'll have our own way to make words out of noises." Reinventing language is part of that mission. Yes, African Americans created Hip-Hop but it has now broken racial and national boundaries. Hip-Hop, explains Dennis, is mostly about artistic phrasing. It entails the reshaping of terms and meanings in the interest of self-distinction.

Authenticity is therefore Dennis's paramount concern. He and his crew resent the stigma that mainstream people impose upon their expressive lexicon. In discussing Tupac Shakur, one of the tragic figures in *gangsta* music, Dennis observes

[H]e's someone [kids] look up to, a role model, meaning, 'look, you don't have to wear a tie and suit to work because, look at him [Shakur], he made it and he's representing us.' My goal is to push my culture, to help it roll in my own community so I don't see it die. Where I am, Hip-Hop and graffiti is part of Cuban culture. We have Cuban graffiti writers, Cuban MCs, Cuban break-dancers. The baddest break-dancer around is Speedy Legs [Richard Hernandez). He was born in Cuba and grew up in Hialeah.

In other words, to mute the sting of disrespect and redeem local ways of life are the goals of Dennis Martinez and his friends. They see themselves as inner city casualties, neglected and held in contempt by outsiders. With rhetorical flare he asks, "If I don't give honor to my neighborhood and culture, who will?". The answer is obvious—he and those like him will recast working-class Cuban identity.

It is for that reason that, in their pursuits, Hialeah youngsters like Dennis are shunning the rich artistic legacy of their Cuban ancestors and turning instead to Hip-Hop with its potent alternation between disc jockeying, break-dancing, rap music, and graffiti painting. That choice has multiple implications: First, it abjures dominant Cuban culture with its evocations of control, superiority, and class erasure. Second, it upholds expressions created by urban blacks as instruments of confrontation and racial validation. The effect of that appropriation, however, is not the same. Because Hip-Hop has become part of mainstream America it offers working-class Cubans, like Dennis, a way to express dissent without danger, resistance without risk. To the extent that it is an international phenomenon, it also promises membership in youth networks that transcend borders. Dennis Martinez learned much of what he knows about Hip-Hop not from interaction with African Americans but from the World Wide Web. Reverently he notes the pilgrimages of people from points in the globe who travel long distances to visit graffiti shrines in Miami or Los Angeles.

By espousing genres invented by vulnerable and heroic segments of American society, working-class Cubans are claiming a common status with 'the wretched of the earth' while at the same time sharpening their identity vis-à-vis majority Cubans. Their goal is to succeed in their own terms. The reality is that they can't succeed in any other way.

Finally, adherence to Hip-Hop culture allows young people like Dennis to see themselves as part of a larger community without "selling out." The aim is success without surrendering the authentic self. In their early twenties, working-class Cubans, with a limited education, face dire options: either small business drudgery or menial employment. Music and art pose limitless possibilities to achieve wealth and recognition "through the

back door”. The aim of young men like Dennis is not to abdicate wealth and status but to reach them by utilizing the best resources available in the surrounding context. They take inspiration from media figures that have become wealthy and famous without altering their mode of speech or the way they dress. As expressive entrepreneurs they are as interested in aesthetics as they are in financial success.

Dennis’ fear is that people like him will be blotted out both by the larger society and by more accomplished members of his national group. It is in that sense that he aims at "murdering the alphabet." By reconfiguring language and communicating through art, he and those like he are heightening their profile, making it visible and howling, I am!

What Dennis dreams about has already been accomplished by Xavier Cortada. He was born in New York in 1970, the son of Cuban refugees, but grew up close to Miami’s South West 8th Street, *Calle Ocho, en la Saucera*, as local Cubans would call the area with alliterative humor. When he was a child, his grandmother would sit in her rocking chair to tell him stories about Cuba. It was the only way for her to introduce family members on the island to her U.S.-born grandson. She succeeded; Xavier knew them all by name.

Xaver also learned from his grandmother to regret Fidel Castro’s revolution:

[She taught me] how it executed opponents, proscribed civil liberties, denied due process, appropriated private property. In my head, I saw how she pleaded for the militants to spare the lives of her detained sons. I saw how my Dad boarded an airplane and was forced to flee his beloved homeland. Growing up in Cuban Miami—attending *Los Municipios* , praying in *La Ermita [de la Caridad del Cobre]* , or listening to Cuban radio—I experienced first hand how the regime had

destroyed so many other lives. Every time another exile landed, I relived the stories.

In his late-thirties, Cortada is the most distinguished painter of his generation. He is best known for his collaborative public art, which has included murals in Switzerland, South Africa, Northern Ireland and Cyprus. In 1998, “Cubaba,” his first solo show in Miami focused on identity, which Cortada interprets as “being Cuban, being American, being both [while] being neither.” Three years later, the “No Tengan Miedo” exhibit allowed him to explore the impact of the pope’s visit to the island. In 2002 he tackled his most ambitious project yet, the installation of a Monument to Freedom in the city that has become the Mecca of Cuban creativity, Miami. As he puts it,

I tackle the tragedy of the Cuban Revolution by appropriating one of its airplanes. I am literally painting vibrant images on one half of the actual Russian Antonov-2 Colt airplane that brought a family from Cuba to the United States. The other half I am leaving intact—bare, neglected, dilapidated—a metaphor for the state of Cuba after 45 years of oppression. As part of the installation, I am also presenting 45 pieces of luggage numbered sequentially from 1959 to 2004, representing each year the Cuban community has been in exile.

Cortada speaks eloquently about the cultural erosion created by the Diaspora. He sees erosion in the absence of Cuba’s children from the island, the many that never saw their homeland again and are buried in foreign lands. He is especially moved by what he sees as the plight of Cubans still living under Castro’s regime:

The many Cubans who live daily lies. who eat a piece of their own soul day in and day out, so that in the end they are mere husks. But saddest of all are the empty rafts that have washed up on the beaches of Florida.

Thus, in Cortada's mind, erosion is mainly represented by the vast graveyard of water that separates Cuba and Florida—no one knows how many bodies lie in its bottom of people who sought a new life abroad. Yet one thing Cortada is certain will not erode: “an enduring awareness of all that has happened under Cuba's repressive regime.” The original pain to the older exiles lives on in the recovered memory of second-generation Cubans.

Xavier Cortada and his color-splashed murals depicting a yearning for freedom that for being Cuban is all the more universal bring the story told in this paper full circle. Some years ago it was possible to anticipate the fading of passion over the lost country among youngsters growing up in Miami. They were to be *los pinos nuevos*, the new pine shoots that José Martí—Cuba's topmost hero—had evoked almost a century before as the hope for the nation. Instead, growing up in Miami, a new generation of talented Cubans clings to the memories of their parents as a mark of identity and as a testimony of their devotion to the dislocating experience of their elders. Their art filled with images of a story heard but not lived is now part of American culture.

Conclusions

In one of his most celebrated movies, *All about my Mother* (1999), the Spanish filmmaker, Pedro Almodóvar introduces the remarkable character of Agrado, whose name literally means “Delight.” Agrado is a transsexual prostitute with an open heart and a penchant for survival who has spent a good amount of money in plastic surgery. Forced in an emergency to face an alternatively bemused and hostile theater audience, Agrado

demurs that authenticity is never more aptly achieved than when recreating the body in the image of the ideal self. The quip is not only meant to be humorous—it is also a serious reflection about the nature of social realities. In the case of Miami Cubans, the vanished island that the heart pines for has become an image emblazoned in the walls of the collective mind, an imagined nation for that very reason more real than the one described through factual accounts in history books, a country made visible through the reenactment of dance, theater, painting, and music.

Among first-generation Cubans, aesthetic expressions and preferences denote cultural linearity—they form a bridge to the familiar forms of the past. They also constitute a means to assert superior breeding and class status in an adopted country known for its discriminating propensity. Artistic production and enjoyment signals to the host society the reasons why Cubans are entitled to belong in American society. Beyond linguistic barriers, art emerges as a universal means of communication depending on sound, color and gesture to create ties. Those capable of aesthetic enjoyment are members of the same community despite temporal or geographic divides. Aesthetic empathy is also one of the elements of *bounded solidarity*. Shared tastes and styles unite people into a cohesive whole. The music of Lecuona, the ballet of Alicia Alonso, Albita's smoldering performances, and Gloria Estefan's crossover appeal are all part of a process by which the Cuban culture of nostalgia merges with and is absorbed by American society.

Among second-generation immigrants the tendency is towards fracture and innovation. Yet the story is more complex than suggested by that generalization. Three trends are worth highlighting: one is the search for *expressive entrepreneurship* as a means to attain financial independence and social recognition through aesthetic creation.

Second, artistic expressions among the children of the Cuban Diaspora continue to give voice to the anguish that resulted from expulsion and relocation. The imaginary country forged in the mind of exiles is now the legacy of youngsters who grew up in the United States and the subject of their art.

Finally, for young Cuban Americans artistic possibilities are not limited to the forms derived from the rich history of the ancestral country. They are now Americans and as such, a broad spectrum of new cultural manifestations is available to them. Over the last three decades, Hip-Hop has been a rich source of inspiration for youngsters in this country, including the children of immigrants. The reason, I have argued, is that the black experience of suffering and endurance has now been embraced throughout the world as a marker of rebellion. It stands as a symbol of shared resistance against the homogenizing effects of the market and the oppressive effects of formal employment. It is in that sense that the descendants of slaves and the children of exiles have become one community. In the world of art almost everything is possible.

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