

INTRODUCTION

Cuban Tightrope

Public and Private Lives of the Poets

Relations with Cuba have preoccupied the North American imagination far more than one might expect, given the island's small size and minimal power.¹ North American understanding of Cuba has, at the same time, been obscured by longings for the exotic, as well as mythologies of both right and left, in which Cubans have also been known to indulge. It's been imagined as a place simpler than our own, whose people are less inhibited and more passionate, friendly to strangers and prone to dancing in the street, a land strangely set apart in a childhood fantasy, as evidenced by the opulent hulks that cruise its streets. For those of the left, there's the equally simplified Cuba of heroes, where the new man, freed from the shackles of exploitive cultures, has managed to create a society based on cooperation and compassion rather than greed, despite the opposition of the giant to the north. And for those of the right there's a gray, joyless, island-wide gulag, where all spirits are crushed under the weight of oppression.

The reality has always been more complex. Except for a period of relative cultural isolation and attendant provincialism between the collapse of the Spanish empire on the mainland in the 1820s and Cuba's own achievement of independence in 1902, Havana has been a cosmopolitan city. It was one of the major entrepôts of Spanish America, and all the currents of European thought and culture passed through its port. Cuba has had an active literary culture for four hundred years, which since the late nineteenth century has had a disproportionate influence on the literatures of all of the Spanish-speaking Americas. Even before the Revolution, when literacy rates hovered around 70 percent, the education of those who received one was often extraordinary. Among the first actions of the revolutionary government was a massive literacy campaign and a large investment in education at every level, as a result of which Cuba has one of the highest literacy rates and one of the best-educated populations anywhere. Presses and journals, though plagued by censorship and worse, and under government control, like almost everything else in Cuba, have proliferated, publishing an endless outpouring of

books, a portion of each press run made available to the general population at giveaway prices in subsidized bookstores. Those who have chosen or been forced into exile have often been of the educated classes, and they, too, have spawned a publishing industry and a major efflorescence of literature and thought, which, because of the successive waves of emigration, has remained closely allied to the development of poetry on the island.

Very little of the poetry of Cuba and its diaspora has made its way into the awareness of non-Spanish speakers. The long postrevolutionary U.S. embargo is partly to blame, limiting the flow of information, but also limiting imports of paper to the island, so that books have been produced in small editions and rarely reprinted.

Perhaps more important than the effects of the embargo is the unsystematic way in which writing makes its way from one language to another. Faced with the overwhelming presence of the source culture, translators tend to translate work that flatters their preconceptions and the preconceptions of publishers and readers. Which is to say that politics often figures in the choice. This is especially true for poetry, a hard sell at the best of times. So, for instance, Heberto Padilla, a fine poet, was being published in translation by major New York publishers almost as soon as he left the island, for reasons that will become apparent, while the poetry of essential figures like José Lezama Lima and Eliseo Diego has had to wait for decades.

Between the late 1960s and early 1990s another factor came into play. Cuban poets needed government permission to have their work published, whether on or off the island, and until recently only the favored were allowed to travel abroad, as promoters of Cuba and their own work. A small cadre of what have come to be called the *oficialistas*, poets who, like Pablo Armando Fernández, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Miguel Barnet, and Nancy Morejón, often hold important government posts, became the public face of Cuban poetry in the outside world and have tended to be disproportionately published in translation. That most of them have also been victims of repression is often forgotten.

The reception of poets of the diaspora has also been influenced by politics. José Kozler, perhaps Cuba's most influential living poet and a resident of the United States since 1960, speaks of being shunned by the left in his adoptive country as a *gusano*, a worm, the term of abuse for anti-Castro exiles of the far right, while right-wing exiles themselves have sometimes rejected him as a communist because of his liberal politics; he, and those like him, have had a difficult time breaking into print in English.

Little of the work included here will be familiar to English-language

readers, regardless of its source: most of the few translations that exist have been published in fugitive journals and books that have vanished from the bookshelves, and despite the lively interest in all things Cuban, there have been only a handful of narrowly focused bilingual anthologies.² *The Whole Island*, surprisingly, is the first attempt at a comprehensive picture of Cuban poetry in the modern period. I have tried to present a range of poetries that represent the best of what's been published in book form by native-born or naturalized Cubans writing in Spanish on or off the island, beginning with the founding of the seminal journal *Orígenes* in 1944 by Lezama Lima and the critic José Rodríguez Feo, and to present as well the full range of Cuban practice in this period.

It's worth bearing in mind that the discussion that follows inevitably suffers from a kind of tunnel vision. Cuban poetry in this account may seem separate from other arts and thought, even those produced by the poets themselves, many of whom are also novelists, essayists, and playwrights. It may also seem more Cuba-centered than the poetry itself, although a strong strain of exceptionalism in Cuba long predates the official messianism of the current regime.

It's also helpful to remember that Cuba's culture is in some ways very different from ours. North American readers may notice, for instance, the relative paucity of women in this anthology—only twelve of the fifty-five poets included. This proportion appears consistent with the relative numbers of women published on the island, although there may be a change in the works in the generation too young to be represented here, and it's not true of Cuban-born poets in the United States, where the gender division approximates that of North American poetry in general. My numbers are, at any rate, consistent with the proportions in the standard anthologies in Spanish.³

The relative scarcity of Cuban women poets has not been a hot-button issue on the island, although poets like Nancy Morejón and Reina María Rodríguez tend not to be shy about their displeasures. There don't appear to be any cultural or official barriers that women have to overcome to write or publish, and there have been important women writers in Cuba since the late nineteenth century. Some women have also wielded considerable power in literary bureaucracies, among them Morejón, who heads the Caribbean section of Casa de las Américas, the preeminent arts organization on the island, and Haydée Santamaría, who founded it in 1959 and was its director for twenty years until her death.

None of those I have asked about this subject have offered an explanation

for the imbalance. Cubans of both genders have in fact been surprised by the question—it had simply never been raised.

Race plays a very different role in Cuba than in the United States, and although there is certainly plenty of racism, and economic inequality tends to cling to color lines as it does in the United States, it's considerably less poisonous than here.⁴ One difference is the lack of a sense that ownership of African culture is restricted to those of African descent. It raises no eyebrows, for instance, that Miguel Barnet, a White ethnographer of Afro-Cuban culture, writes "ethnographic novels" from the point of view of Afro-Cubans, any more than Pablo Armando Fernández' right to compose his *santería*-derived poems would be questioned because of his color.⁵

The *negrista* poems (as Latin Americans refer to writing in Afro-Spanish dialect) familiar to non-Cubans from the early work of Nicolás Guillén had passed from fashion by 1944, and the major poets have rarely written in black dialect since. Like most of their white compatriots, Afro-Cuban poets tend to come from educated, urban backgrounds, and with the enormous extension of quality education in the generations since the Revolution I doubt that many of them would be able to speak or write dialect unselfconsciously.

Skin tone also functions differently in Cuban culture; those of mixed heritage are seen, and tend to see themselves, as a separate group. Guillén, for instance, would react indignantly if called black, insisting that he was *mulato*. For this reason the translators have retained the Spanish *mulato/mulata*, rather than using the English language mulatto, which carries very different cultural baggage.

At least nine of the included poets are *mulato* or black, and several others may be as well. It's not customary to include author portraits or mentions of race on book jackets in Cuba.

My goal, in any case, has been to present a collection of the most significant poems and poets within an evolving context that Cuban poets and readers might recognize, not as North Americans might wish it.

Among Cuban poets and readers there is general agreement about who the most important poets are, and I have included these, except for Dulce María Loynaz, whose estate's demands were exorbitant.⁶ I have included as well a selection of other fine poets, many of them younger, from among the large number who had to be excluded because of limitations of space. Inevitably, this has led to injustices, but I hope that my choices are at least plausible.

Anthologies are about choices. My hope has been to display something of the complex matrix of ways of thinking about poetry and their environments that Cuban poets have woven, to create something of a group portrait through time of an extraordinary poetic culture very different from our

own. Political considerations have played no part, though I am well aware that one polemic or another will inevitably be read into my inclusions and exclusions, and even into the line and page counts allocated to each poet.

Within Cuban poetry there's a mini-genre centered around the metaphor of the tightrope walker, deriving from Eliseo Diego's "The Rope Dancer's Risks" (p. x). It's been put to different uses, but for me it has become something of an overarching metaphor for the Cuban poet's suspension between the external—the political—and the demands of craft and psyche.

The connection between politics and poetry has in fact been expressed by a tradition of poetic exile and martyrdom. Among Cuba's most important nineteenth-century poets, José María Heredia (1803–1839) was forced into exile; Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, known by his pen-name Plácido (1809–1844), was executed for his supposed participation in a slave rebellion, and Juan Clemente Zenea (1832–1871) was executed as a rebel during Cuba's interminable and brutal wars of independence.

The most significant figure by far was José Martí (1853–1895), universally known as the Apostle of Independence, who was killed in the first engagement of Cuba's final struggle for freedom from Spain. His contemporary, Julián del Casal (1863–1893), has been assigned the role of an apolitical counterweight of sorts, not least by Lezama. Both are usually considered early members of or participants in the loosely organized hemisphere-wide movement known as *modernismo*, the idiosyncratic Latin American adaptation of French Romantic and Symbolist poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century. Their impact was felt during their lifetimes, but most of their work only became available in the 1920s, when the poets of the *Orígenes* group were first learning their craft.

Martí was the chief propagandist and theorist of Cuba's final War of Independence. He is ubiquitous, in public statuary and on the walls of every schoolroom and government office in Cuba, and in the opening lines of his "Versos sencillos" ("Simple Verses"), appropriated for the lyrics of "Guan-tanamera," Cuba's unofficial national anthem. Thanks to the Cuban exile community, he joins the other liberators of Latin America at the northern end of New York's Avenue of the Americas, where it gives way to Central Park, frozen in monumental bronze on his rearing horse at the moment before he was to be struck down in battle.

Martí was also one of Latin America's most influential poets. He was largely responsible for the introduction of Whitman to Spanish-language poetry, as well as for the introduction of free verse, though much of his own verse was rhymed. While poetry in rhyme, especially sonnets, is still written,

free verse, and the long Whitmanic line, have become the dominant forms of Latin American verse.

In Martí's work can be found germs of the three tendencies that have governed most of Cuban poetry since: his often difficult syntax, extreme imagery, and nervous line are reminiscent of the *neobarroco*; there are poems that have the proselike cadences of what's come to be called *conversacionalismo*; and there are the poems that justify his position as a *modernista*.

A large part of Martí's impact has been as a role model, the quintessential revolutionary and patriot, the politically committed poet. "Every Cuban," according to José Kozer, "in his heart of hearts wants to be José Martí. But we lack two things that would be necessary to make this possible: the breadth of language as total knowledge and expression, and an ethical sense of life whose daily character is absolute, demanding of us a maximum of compassionate and spiritual behavior. . . . It's impossible to live with the language and ethical purity of the Apostle."⁷ He has become the demanding conscience of Cuban poetry.

The poetry and life of Julián del Casal more closely approximate the standard image of *modernismo*. A dandy and *flâneur*, he dressed the part of the poet, as he had learned it from Baudelaire, whose crucial influence he introduced to Latin America, along with Baudelaire's invention, the prose poem (translating and imitating several of the master's), although most of Casal's poetry is in conventional rhymed forms. He cultivated an aesthete's eye in his personal collecting, in his poetry (introducing the *japonisme* that remains a part of Cuban culture), and in the remarkable *crónicas* that he wrote for the Havana newspapers to earn his keep. These journalistic pieces range from keenly noted society reportage to portraits of Havana's slums, all recounted with an ironic detachment. He has become the model for the poet as poet first and last, and for the creation of a politically inviolable aesthetic and personal realm.

It's tempting to elevate Martí and Casal into champions of the two arms of a dichotomy that can serve as the key to understanding the dialogue of Cuban poetry since 1944, but the choices taken have seldom been that stark. One needn't, however, exaggerate the explanatory power of the conflict between the ideal or necessity of a politically engaged poetry and the hope for a more private verse to appreciate its centrality. For a Cuban poet to be apolitical is so counter to expectations that it's inevitably interpreted as a political statement in itself.

By the late 1930s, when Lezama began publishing, *modernismo*'s moment had passed (though it continued, notably, in the work of Dulce María Loynaz

and remained an influence on a great deal that was to follow, including the lyrics of the *origenista* Eliseo Diego and the persistence of the figure of poet as *flâneur*). It was replaced as the dominant mode by what Latin Americans call *vanguardismo* (which is no more related to what we call in English the avant-garde than *modernismo* is related to what we call modernism). In Cuba, by the 1940s, the aspect of *vanguardismo* called *coloquialismo* or *conversacionalismo* had become dominant.⁸

Conversacionalismo eschewed the ornate imagery and vocabulary of *modernismo*, as well as its symbolism and indirection, in favor of a syntactically straightforward verse written in the language of everyday speech, a “poetry that does not inevitably have to be subjected to abstraction and the systematic chain of metaphors which have tyrannized poetics in the Spanish language over the centuries,” as Heberto Padilla put it.⁹ Eugenio Florit’s epistolary “Poets Alone in Manhattan,” and the work of Guillén, Virgilio Piñera, Fayad Jamís, and of course Padilla, are examples of *conversacionalismo*’s range, and it has remained the majority strain in Cuban poetry. Not incidentally, it has proven particularly useful for writers of political verse.

Padilla, to a degree that his contemporaries (who allied themselves with French surrealist and existentialist poetry) probably would have found disturbing, saw Cuban poetry as in need of an infusion of influence from the poetry of his English-language contemporaries, especially Robert Lowell. Lowell, in Padilla’s estimation, “had brought back to American poetry a vigor of language that had dissipated—he was different from Eliot, Auden, Stevens, and William Carlos Williams,” all published in *Orígenes*, and “he distanced himself also from the Beat poets. . . .”¹⁰ The goal was a poetry in which the shaping hand of the poet was invisible.

Like most forms of thought, poetry usually requires that the overwhelming amount of language and other phenomena that are always present be radically filtered. For *conversacionalistas*, as for their English-language counterparts, that filtering is in the service of the presentation of a logically coherent argument that should be understandable by any competent reader. As such, its focus is on the end to be reached—an end known to the poet beforehand—rather than on what’s encountered in the process of getting there. Since 1937, when his first book was published, but reaching its fulfillment in his poetry of the 1940s and thereafter, Lezama elaborated a very different practice. Taking his cue not from the poetry of another culture but from Spain’s Baroque, out of which had grown its New World colonies, and particularly from the work of Luis de Góngora, he brought attention back to the world of undifferentiated phenomena that we all inhabit. So, in his major poems, the reader confronts an unfiltered glut of information,

presented without syntactic or ideational hierarchy. The “Ode to Julian del Casal,” for instance, presents details of Casal’s Havana and the Havana of Lezama’s day; obscure, sometimes private, references; allusions to the *crónicas*; objects from Casal’s, as well as Lezama’s, collection of art and oddities; inner thought and outer experience presented without boundaries or inhibitions; appear to be thrown at us helter-skelter, by means of an enormous vocabulary borrowing from the idioms of different trades, times, dialects, and places.

Padilla was to tell us in his memoir that reading Lezama “I found myself violently dispatched to a realm of pure language, his one and only kingdom.”¹¹ From the beginning Lezama had confronted the accusation that his work was obscurantist, hermetic, a mere construct of language, disengaged from ordinary life, disinterested in social reality. He would answer, famously, that “sólo lo difícil es estimulante,”¹² only the difficult stimulates growth (which I find myself recasting as a statement at once Darwinian and from the realm of religious and therapeutic practice, “only hardship begets change”), but also that “understanding” was beside the point—the poem was to be experienced as a thing in itself, not as a subject for paraphrase. An analogy that comes to mind is a first encounter with a forest or any complex ecosystem. One can deconstruct the forest, catalog its species and their interactions, but it can’t be paraphrased, one has to experience it as simply there. The Lezamian moment is of that order of reality—all the confusion of the unfiltered moment present at once. As such, he claimed, it was a more profound engagement with everyday life than the clarified narrative of *conversacionalismo*.¹³

There is no way to cope with this flood of phenomena except to submit oneself to the moment and be carried along in a fugal current, where words, references, and motifs recur and recombine in changing, progressive guises, creating an inexorable propulsive force.

Haroldo de Campos and Sévero Sarduy were to name this kind of art *neobarroco*,¹⁴ a term that Lezama and his companions never used, but it’s apt enough that it’s become the term of choice, not only, I think, because Lezama had invoked the Baroque masters, but also because behind his practice is the central metaphor of the Baroque, the neoplatonic *concordia discors*, harmony out of discord.

To paraphrase a large body of theology, out of the apparent chaos of the disjunct phenomena of a moment, a life, the natural world, and all of human history arises a harmony only perceivable to the mind of their maker, who alone is capable of simultaneous awareness of all things. To approach that state (and it is the function of the immense polyphonic structures of Baroque

music, art and architecture to help us do so) is to approach the state of profound, endless ecstasy of the saved, who in the afterlife are joined to the mind of God, recapturing the harmony of the paradise garden from which humans were expelled for their discordant sin.¹⁵

Lezama thought of himself as a Catholic, but his version of Catholicism scandalized the more orthodox members of his circle. Hell, he thought, didn't exist, or if it did, it was and had always been empty.¹⁶ He seems also not to have had a strong personal sense of a sinful nature to be overcome. And he apparently wasn't willing to consign paradise to the next life, pointedly naming his autobiographical novel *Paradiso*, in Italian, rather than the Spanish *paraíso*, so that his reference to the final book of Dante's allegorical *Divine Comedy* would be unmistakable. For Lezama, the ecstatic moment was in the full experience of the garden of this world, not the next.¹⁷

Orígenes, the first important organ for the dissemination of the *neobarroco*, began life in 1944 with an edition of three hundred hand-delivered copies. By the late 1940s the *neobarroco* had become a force with which hostile critics had to reckon, inspiring an essay in the large-circulation weekly *Bohemia* (which at the time was something like a combination of *Newsweek*, *People*, and the *New Yorker*).¹⁸ In the three decades since Lezama's death it has become perhaps the dominant strain in Latin American poetry, among poets Catholic or otherwise.

What Kozler said of the demands posed by Martí could be applied equally to Lezama, and very few Cuban poets, other than the entirely secular Kozler, have risen to the challenge. Only Cintio Vitier (a Catholic), Samuel Feijóo (a Communist), Lorenzo García Vega (secular), and Raúl Hernández Novás (secular) have fully embraced it, though it has powerfully influenced the work of others, particularly Ángel Escobar and Soleida Ríos.

Orígenes emerged in a rare interval of relative calm in Cuba's tortured history, when Fulgencio Batista, who had been the de facto power on the island since he seized control of the military in 1933, was content to allow a civil government to rule. It was a uniquely permissive government in matters of censorship, and writers were basically ignored, which meant that a nonpolitical poetry became conceivable.

Most of the poets who have become known as the *Orígenes* group or generation, among them Piñera, Gastón Baquero, Diego, Vitier, Fina García Marruz, and, somewhat later, García Vega, had originally come together around three earlier short-lived journals that Lezama had edited, and they were united as much by Lezama's commanding presence and example (even his enemies saw him as something of a poetic saint for his total devotion to his art) as by his practice. It's helpful to remember how young they were in

1944. Lezama, at 34, was the oldest. Piñera was 32, Baquero 28, Diego 24, Vitier 23, García Marruz 21, and García Vega 17. It was a close-knit group. Lezama and Piñera's tortured, passionate friendship was already a decade old. Vitier and García Marruz were to marry, and Diego would marry García Marruz' sister. The poet and priest Ángel Gaztelu, Lezama's confessor and himself a member of the group, officiated at their weddings. Except for Piñera and García Vega, they all espoused a meditative Catholicism, and Lezama was something of a pontifical figure for his younger compatriots.

Orígenes was to publish forty issues, surviving until 1956, well into Batista's final thuggish presidency. It included work by Cuban poets who never identified themselves with the *Orígenes* group, including Eugenio Florit, Samuel Feijóo, Fayad Jamis, Pablo Armando Fernández, and Roberto Fernández Retamar, as well as a Who's Who of French, North American and English, and Spanish-language poets. But the seeds of its fracture were evident from the first, in Lezama's high-handedness, its perceived failure to engage politically, and also, as Piñera was to admit, its Catholicism.¹⁹ Rodríguez Feo was to withdraw his co-editorship, and, crucially, his financial support, after issue 34, publishing two parallel issues under his sole editorship before ceding the title to Lezama's version, which published its final issues with Baquero's financing. Immediately thereafter, Rodríguez Feo founded *Ciclón*, which continued publication until its voluntary dissolution shortly after the Revolution. Piñera was its guiding voice, and he published none of his erstwhile colleagues.

The entry of the revolutionary army into Havana early in January of 1959 irrevocably changed the lives of all Cubans. In the discussion that follows I will not attempt a balance sheet of the Revolution's impact for good or ill. My interest here is in the lives and work of Cuba's poets, who, like intellectuals in general, have probably been subject to greater scrutiny and repression than the population at large, although most of them were early and enthusiastic supporters of the Revolution. Almost all have suffered losses, though some have also gained.

It's also not my intention to judge the reactions and accommodations of men and women who have lived through a period of sometimes extreme psychological, political, and material stress, with which they have coped with varying degrees of grace. Sustained heroism and purity of motive are given to very few.

With the coming of the Revolution the place of the poet in relation to power structures became critical. Some, like Florit, denounced the new regime, from the safety of a comfortable life abroad, for its secularism

and its impact on the old elite. A very few fled immediately, among them Baquero, who had been a member of the Batista government. Uniquely, he settled in Franco's hyper-Catholic, hyperauthoritarian Spain. Some who were too young to decide for themselves left with their families and much of the middle class between 1960 and 1965. Two, Iraida Iturralde and Lourdes Gil, were sent ahead by their families into exile, in the notorious Pedro Pan airlift, the product of rumors, spread by the CIA and elements of the U.S. Catholic church, that Cuban children were to be imprisoned in slave labor camps in the Soviet Union.

A far larger group of poets returned from abroad to take part in the new regime. There had been growing colonies of Cubans in the United States and elsewhere since the 1850s, and Paris had long been a place of refuge for Cuban writers.²⁰ Whether to leave or stay has always entailed a calculation of levels of comfort and discomfort. Those who were less attached to life on the island left voluntarily. I have mentioned Florit. José Kozar, who had been preparing to leave since adolescence, was another, although the expropriation of his father's business and the family's subsequent emigration made return unlikely.

Some of the poets who were to leave in subsequent waves of emigration, from 1980s Marielitos to those who have left legally in the past decade, have been victims of repression and worse, and others have left for reasons of ideology, but it's probably fair to say that the desire for a life with fewer material constraints has usually been a factor, perhaps increasingly so as leaving has become less dangerous.

Guillén, Pablo Armando Fernández, Jamís, Padilla, and José Álvarez Baragaño were among the large number of artists and intellectuals who returned, for reasons as varied as their reasons for leaving had been. Some, like Guillén, had been in political exile; others, like Pablo Armando Fernández, had left as part of the economic diaspora; and others had left because of discomfort with the political or cultural limitations of life on the island. There is no doubt that an enthusiasm for the creation of a new kind of society was a powerful motivation for return—it's difficult to deny the sincerity of the post-1959 poems of Jamís and Álvarez Baragaño, for instance—but they must also have been drawn by the probability of employment in a rapidly expanding cultural sector. These same motivations probably influenced the decisions of many intellectuals already on the island to stay.

It became the norm for writers to be employed in government ministries or government-funded arts and publishing.

Almost immediately after the Revolution, the clandestine newspaper of Castro's July 26th Movement, *Revolución*, surfaced and became Cuba's lead-

ing newspaper. Its weekly cultural supplement, *Lunes de Revolución*, under the direction of Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Pablo Armando Fernández, and with the active editorial participation of Piñera, Padilla, and Álvarez Baragaño, quickly grew from twelve to forty-eight pages with a weekly circulation of 250,000. Almost all of the older generation of poets (with the notable exception of Baquero, who had been written out of history) and most of those who, coming of age in the 1950s, have come to be known as the Generation of the Fifties, contributed. Reading *Lunes*' weekly supplement's table of contents, one is struck by the vast optimism of the time: its enormous array of Cuban and foreign authors and subject matter is witness to unlimited curiosity and the freedom to satisfy it.²¹

It also contains, in the issue of December 7, 1959, a strange diatribe by Padilla against Lezama and the entire *Orígenes* group that recasts earlier complaints about their mystical bent and distance from ordinary speech and reality into the much more dangerous language of the Revolution. For Padilla, Lezama and company are "the evidence of our literary colonialism and our subservience to enslaving literary forms. It's not an accident that the words, the vocabulary of those poets retains everywhere a repeated allusion to monarchy: kingdom, crown, prince, princess, heralds. . . ." In the new Cuba, by contrast, "the poet who expresses his anguish or joy will have this primary responsibility: he will have to oppose to gratuitous song a voice of service. . . ." The *Orígenes* group will survive, he writes, as a reminder of "the stupidities that we put an end to in 1959."²²

Two weeks later Pablo Armando Fernández, who a few months earlier had written similarly about Lezama and *Orígenes* in *Ciclón*,²³ included Lezama's work in *Lunes* for the first time, with the tacit agreement of Piñera and over the opposition of Padilla and Álvarez Baragaño.²⁴

The dream of a new Cuba in which the writers gathered around *Lunes* hoped to participate began to disintegrate almost immediately. From the very beginning there were signs—criticisms, attempts at coercion. By early 1961, in the wake of the crisis begun by the imposition of the U.S. embargo in November 1960 and the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, the slow train wreck that was to be the next decade had started.

The first blow was an attack on *Lunes*, not, ostensibly, because of its inclusion of opinions at odds with the increasingly hardening stance of the regime, but over Sabá Cabrera and Orlando Jiménez' sixteen-minute film *PM*, a *cinéma vérité* stroll through Havana's working-class black night life, for which *Lunes* had financed postproduction. The film was almost immediately withdrawn from exhibition by the government, criticized for showing an aspect of Cuban life that was unflattering to the nation, but the real

issue seems to have been consolidation of power and control. Castro was moving quickly toward the Communist Party, perhaps in order to flatter the Soviet regime, potentially a source of desperately needed hard currency and a guarantor of security against U.S. aggression, and the newly formed Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) was run by Communist bureaucrats intent on consolidating the party's power.²⁵

The resolution was that all film production would be placed under the control of ICAIC and *Lunes* would be shut down, and a meeting of artists, intellectuals, and the government, including Castro—billed as a town meeting where all viewpoints could be expressed freely—was called for Friday, June 16, 1961, and the following two Fridays in the auditorium of the National Library. In the event, the floor was largely left to the government and those who agreed with it. Only a few of the more skeptical artists and writers ventured to speak, among them Piñera, who let it be known that there was a suspicion in the artistic community of repression to come. He was assured that those who agreed with the Revolution had nothing to fear.²⁶

In *Palabras a los intelectuales*, which Castro delivered at the final session, he addressed at length what he saw as “the fundamental question raised here . . . the question of artistic freedom.” His answer is a long, chilling justification of censorship and a series of slightly veiled threats. Only those even among the honorable who were not sufficiently sure of their revolutionary convictions, he says, would raise the issue of artistic freedom, “because the revolutionary places the Revolution above all such questions, above his own creative spirit; he places the Revolution above everything else, and the most revolutionary artist would be willing to sacrifice even his artistic vocation for the Revolution.”²⁷

“We are . . . revolutionaries,” he continued. “Those who are artists first and revolutionaries second don't think as we do. . . . We must think of the people first and ourselves after, and that is the only attitude that can be called truly revolutionary. And it's for those who don't have that attitude, but are nonetheless honorable, that the problem exists, and just as the Revolution is a problem for them, they constitute a problem that the Revolution must deal with.” The solution is that the Revolution must give artists “who are not truly revolutionaries . . . a space within the Revolution where they can work and create and where their creative spirit, even if they are not revolutionary writers or artists, will have the opportunity and liberty to be expressed, within the Revolution. Which means: within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing. . . . I think this is sufficiently clear. What rights do writers and artists have, whether or not they are revolutionaries? Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, no rights at

all.”²⁸ It was sufficiently clear for many. Cabrera Infante, for one, secured a diplomatic post abroad.

In the remainder of his speech Castro outlined plans for the greatly expanded system of artistic education that remains one of the Revolution’s great achievements, as well as plans for a centralized organization of artists and writers. Two months later the First National Congress of Cuban Writers and Artists created the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC). Nicolás Guillén was its first president; Lezama Lima was one of its vice presidents, and largely responsible for its aesthetic direction. Its publishing arm, Ediciones Unión, which also produces the journal *Unión*, very quickly became, and remains, one of Cuba’s most important publishers of poetry.

Membership in UNEAC conveyed privileges, as it still does: a monthly stipend, and access to employment in publishing and government arts bureaucracies. It was also an instrument of control. Of the artists and writers active in 1961 perhaps a third were allowed to join. Then as now non-members have had to find other ways to make a living. For its first two decades it was not uncommon for writers to be expelled. This still happens on occasion, as we shall see.

The night of October 11, 1961, which has become known as *La Noche de las Tres Ps*—the Night of the Three Ps—saw the first of a series of roundups of suspected prostitutes, pimps, and pederasts. Many were arrested while cruising, but some, including Piñera, simply because they were known or assumed to be gay. Unusually for Cuba, Piñera had always been open about his orientation. He was quickly released, out of fear that his celebrity would bring embarrassing attention to the regime.

Homosexuality had been illegal in Cuba since 1938, but the law had rarely been enforced. Gays and lesbians in general led closeted lives, socializing with each other at home or in private clubs. With the Revolution, a more open, flamboyant gay nightlife blossomed. The sudden change in the regime’s attitude two years later was probably a further flattery of Soviet ideas of normalcy, and an expression of the idea that deviant behavior was a product of corrupt capitalist societies. In any event, the change in policy fell particularly heavily on artists and writers, and accusations of homosexuality (as in the United States in the same period) were a weapon always at hand.

Even now, despite the legalization of homosexuality—a process begun in 1979 and completed in 1988—many gay and lesbian Cuban poets are circumspect about making their orientation public. To give a sense of the impact of persecution and innuendo, in an environment where innuendo always contains a threat, of the fifty-five poets included in this anthology I am aware of only twelve who are gays or lesbian. Probably several others

are as well. However, writing explicitly from a gay perspective remains rare. Havana is one of the world capitals of gossip, and *habaneros* seem to have always known who is gay and who straight, which has meant that for much of the past forty-five years gays and lesbians have lived in fear, even those who held and still hold high offices in the arts establishment or the government itself.

Accusations of homosexuality were one of the pretexts for shutting down Ediciones El Puente, one of the last of the independent presses, in 1965, though the real motive was probably further consolidation of state control of the publishing industry. Some of El Puente's authors were homosexual, but sexual orientation hardly defined it. Among the poets it published were Miguel Barnet, Belkis Cuza Malé, and Nancy Morejón. Its editor, José Mario Rodríguez, was drafted into the Military Units to Help Production (UMAP), forced labor battalions made up of "social undesirables," among them Jehovah's Witnesses and gays. UMAPs were certainly used as an assertion of government power, but also as a response to the need to generate hard currency from the labor-intensive sugar industry. Conditions were always spartan and sometimes brutal. The UMAPs were shut down officially in 1967, and the camps were in fact empty by 1969, largely because of protests from the leadership of the government-run dance and theater establishments. By then Rodríguez had left Cuba and reestablished El Puente in Madrid, where he published Delfín Prats, among others.²⁹

In the arts, as well as in the rest of Cuban life, a change was taking place, whose implications were more apparent to some than to others. Cabrera Infante tells us that Lezama warned him in 1966 that it would be a mistake to return to Cuba.³⁰ Heberto Padilla, on the other hand, came back from his government duties abroad and gave his name to what has become known as the Padilla Affair. It was to inaugurate a very dark time.

From the outside what unfolded seems odd to say the least, like a conflict between the right and left hands of the same body. There had been from 1959 onwards criticisms on the island of the directions the Revolution was taking in terms of individual rights, as in the successful protests against the UMAPs, and Padilla took part in these. His work nonetheless continued to be published in highly visible state-supported journals. In 1968 his book *Fuera del juego* (*Out of the Game*, or *On the Sidelines*), from which all of the selections in this anthology are taken, was awarded the Premio Julián del Casal by UNEAC. The jury included Padilla's *bête noire*, Lezama Lima. The prize for drama was awarded to Antón Arrufat's *Los siete contra Tebas* (*The Seven Against Thebes*). The prizes were to include publication by Ediciones Unión.

Immediately after the prizes were announced, both, but especially *Fuera*

del juego, were denounced as counterrevolutionary by Cuba's Interior Ministry and by a range of periodicals, including some, like *El Caimán Barbudo* (*The Bearded Crocodile*), under the editorship of Luis Rogelio Noguerras and then of Lina de Feria, that had recently published Padilla's poems, and significantly in *Verde Olivo* (*Olive Drab*), the journal of the Cuban armed forces. This put UNEAC (which, like virtually all arts organizations in Cuba, regardless of claims to the contrary, has always been a de facto arm of the government) in a difficult position. Bowing to pressure while maintaining the fiction of independence, it published both books, but prefaced with a "Declaration of UNEAC concerning the prizes awarded to Heberto Padilla in Poetry and Antón Arrufat in Theater." The declaration, signed by the governing committee of UNEAC in "the year of the heroic guerrilla," declares that "after several hours of full debate, in which every attendee expressed himself entirely freely," the committee and the deciding jurors agreed that the books would be published, but with the inclusion in each book of a note expressing the governing committee's disagreement with the choice as ideologically at variance with "our Revolution," and listing the names of the jurors who had chosen it. In brief, the declaration asserts that UNEAC had published, in accordance with "the respect that the Revolution has for freedom of expression," several books that had pushed the limits (presumably a veiled reference to Lezama's *Paradiso*, published two years earlier), and that this tolerance of difference had been seen as a weakness to be taken advantage of. *Los siete contra Tebas* was indicted as a counterrevolutionary allegory, and *Fuera del juego*, at much greater length, as a liberal capitalist assertion of individualism at the expense of the overriding need to subsume individualism to the collective action of the Revolution.³¹

The jurors noted, in a separate document, that many of the poems under attack had been published, without controversy, in unimpeachably pro-Revolution journals, like that of the Casa de las Américas. "The book's power and what gives it its revolutionary feeling," they concluded, "is precisely that it isn't justificatory, but critical, polemical, and in its essence wedded to the Revolution as the only possible solution for the problems with which the author is obsessed."³²

Padilla's and Arrufat's books were removed from the shelves of bookstores and libraries shortly after publication. Three years later (during which time the regime had hardened considerably), on March 20, 1971, Padilla and his wife, Belkis Cuza Malé, were arrested. Cuza Malé was released after a few days, but Padilla was held until April 27, accused of "having plotted against the powers of the state." His interrogation during those five weeks didn't quite meet the definition of torture espoused by the Bush administration,

but it was harsh enough.³³ The night of his release he delivered a coerced public confession before a gathering at UNEAC.

His confession took the familiar form of similar acts of contrition under Stalin's and Mao's regimes, but bears as well an uncanny resemblance to the public confessions of born-again sinners in charismatic sects, complete with an admission of something like original sin: "I was more concerned with my own intellectual and literary importance than with the importance of the Revolution." He also admitted being guilty of the sins of unhappiness and skepticism, despite Roberto Fernández Retamar's attempts to enlighten him.

Padilla was aware of what he was doing. By adopting a conventional rhetoric of grandiose repetitions pushed to the limits of bathos he sought to signal that he was acting under duress, but also that he was outsmarting his interrogators. It's doubtful that they missed his intent, and they probably didn't care. They had achieved their goal: there was to be little public dissent by writers for the next two decades.

Padilla had been asked to denounce others, and he complied. He asked his wife, Pablo Armando Fernández, César López, and Lezama (as well as several poets and novelists not included in this anthology) to confess their sins and repent. It is worth quoting in full the passage concerning Lezama:

I know that this experience of mine, comrades, will be an example, will serve as an example to all the others. I know, for example . . . I don't know if he's here, but I venture to mention his name here with all the respect that his work deserves, with all the respect that his conduct deserves on so many levels, with all the respect that his person deserves; I know that I can mention Lezama. I can mention him for one simple reason: the Cuban Revolution has been very fair to Lezama, this very year the Revolution has published two of his books in the most beautiful editions.

But Lezama's judgments have not always been fair to the Cuban Revolution. And all of these judgments, comrades, all of these attitudes and activities . . . are well known, and are well known, moreover, everywhere, are well known, moreover, by State Security; I'm not telling anything new here to anybody, much less to State Security; State Security knows about these attitudes, these opinions exchanged between Cubans and foreigners, opinions that are much more than merely opinions, opinions that constitute an entire point of view that orchestrates an analysis of books that afterward defame the Revolution by leaning upon the opinions of famous writers.

And I have said it: Lezama is not fair and has not been fair, in my conversations with him, in conversations he has had with foreign writers in my presence, he has not been fair to the Revolution. I'm now convinced that Lezama would be capable of coming here to acknowledge it, to recognize it; I am convinced,

because Lezama is an extraordinarily honest man, with a limitless capacity for correction. And Lezama would be capable of coming here to acknowledge it, and to say: yes, *chico*, you're right; and the only possible way to make things right is the correction of our conduct.

Because what else can explain that a Revolution whose principles are Marxist-Leninist, what else but the breadth of its judgment, the extraordinary understanding that the Revolution possesses, [what else can explain] that it publishes even a work like Lezama's, which depends on other political and philosophical concepts, on other interests?³⁴

Through Padilla, the state claims to be all-seeing and all-knowing, and it also takes down what must have been its major target. Lezama was vulnerable for several reasons, not least of which was his exuberant depiction of gay sex in his 1966 novel *Paradiso*. But he was also the arbiter of Cuban letters, despite his strange form of Catholicism, the difficulty of his work, and its almost total lack of political and politicizable content. And he had chosen Padilla's book for publication and defended his choice publicly after its condemnation.

The First National Congress of Education and Culture, which began while Padilla was in jail, ended three days after his release. The closing session featured an address by Castro that was filled with contempt for writers and intellectuals, in the midst of which he set forth the policy that had been evolving since 1961, which was to govern publishing for the next decade and beyond:

We, a revolutionary people in a revolutionary process, value cultural and artistic creations according to their usefulness for the people, according to what they contribute to man, according to what they contribute to mankind's demand, to the liberation of mankind, to mankind's happiness.

Our evaluation is political. There can be no aesthetic value that is against man. There can be no aesthetic value that is against justice, against the well-being, against the liberation, against the happiness of mankind. It can't exist!

For a bourgeois anything can be an aesthetic value if it amuses, or diverts, or helps to entertain the leisure and boredom of the idle, the unproductive parasites. But this can't be a worker's, or a revolutionary's, or a communist's valuation.³⁵

This meant in practice that for the next ten years both the apolitical, nonlinear Lezamian mysticism that Padilla had come very close to labeling counterrevolutionary in 1960 and the plainspoken, ironic, politically engaged *conversacionalismo* that Piñera and Padilla had championed, among other things, as a vehicle for debate within the Revolution, were sidelined in favor of an exhortatory, relentlessly optimistic version of the conversational style, a poetry whose engagement with the Revolution was marked by a critical stance only toward its opponents, a total lack of reflectiveness, the

virtual elimination of the pronoun “I” in favor of “we,” and a plethora of odes to the Revolution’s martyrs and heroes. The term “socialist realism” applies. Almost none of it remains in print, even on the island.

Luis Rogelio Nogueras provides some of the very few bright moments in this grim time. Even his poems that most closely match the opinions of the regime manage a lightness of touch and a personal tone, and he created for some of the poems an ironic distance by signing them with the names of fictitious poets, whose biographies he provided.

The political establishment continued to promote the revolutionary need for an ongoing critique within an ongoing revolutionary process, but it was amply clear that it intended to monopolize that privilege.

Lezama was forced into involuntary retirement; he was not to be published again in Cuba until 1977, the year after his death, although his reputation outside the country continued to grow. Pablo Armando Fernández, who would deliver the eulogy at Lezama’s grave, would not publish in Cuba or abroad, except for a brief chapbook that he printed at his own expense, until 1983. César López would not publish again until 1983, and Antón Arrufat would not be published nor have his plays performed until 1986. Belkis Cuza Malé’s book *Juego de damas* (*Checkers*; literally, *The Game of Ladies*),³⁶ which had just been published at the time of her arrest, was withdrawn from circulation. Her next Cuban publication was in the anthology *Las palabras son islas* (*Words Are Islands*) in 1999.³⁷ She left Cuba in 1979. Padilla’s next Cuban publication was also in *Las palabras son islas*. He left the island in 1980. All of their books were removed from the shelves of bookstores and libraries.

The early 1970s was a period of increased hardship on the island, and that, combined with their suffering at the hands of the regime, would certainly have caused a great many other poets to leave, but exit visas had become almost impossible to attain, except for trusted allies of the regime, who traveled incessantly as its cultural emissaries.

Of those not immediately involved in the Padilla-Arrufat controversy, Piñera was never published (nor his plays produced) again in his lifetime, Vitier and García Marruz collaborated on two works of scholarship, their only publications until the 1980s; and García Vega, who had left the island in 1968, remained unpublished there until *Las palabras son islas*. Francisco de Oraá didn’t publish again until 1978. Perhaps because of their association with El Puente, Miguel Barnet was not to publish again in Cuba until 1980, Nancy Morejón, except for two scholarly works, until 1979, and Delfín Prats (whose first book, *Lenguaje de mudos*, had won UNEAC’s Premio David but was never published in Cuba) until 1987.³⁸ All of their books became unavailable.

Of the *origenistas* who remained in Cuba only Eliseo Diego managed to remain in print. Of their contemporaries, Samuel Feijóo, who had sided with the regime's anti-gay policies in the 1960s, also continued to publish. As for the Generation of the Fifties, only three of the poets represented in this anthology were allowed to publish: Roberto Branly; Fayad Jamís (vulnerable because he had accepted *Paradiso* for publication and drawn its cover art), who spent most of the 1970s and 1980s as a diplomat in Mexico; and Roberto Fernández Retamar, who took on the job of answering the worldwide outburst of criticism from writers previously friendly to the regime.³⁹

It's difficult not to read Francisco de Oraá's "De tres fotos de Mella" ("On Three Photos of Mella"), written in 1980 but not published until 1986, as a reflection on the failures of the preceding decade. Mella, the martyred founder of Cuba's Communist Party, becomes a disapproving superego:

in my reproachful father's brow I seemed to hear Mella's questions:
"What are you doing in the world? What are you doing with your life?"
I answered as my strange self allowed
—strange always to others and alien to my desire,
so that I wasn't what I wanted to be
and I didn't live the way I wished.
I only know that, deep down, I would have wanted to be let loose in the
garden,
and that the garden would grow and become the whole world.⁴⁰

By the late 1970s Cuba had entered into its period of greatest prosperity and security since the Revolution, thanks in large part to direct subsidies and favorable trade agreements with the Soviet Union and its allies, and with the change came a gradual relaxation of the demands placed on writers. Even after the catastrophic economic collapse following the end of the Soviet Union (in a single year the Cuban economy lost 60 percent of its value), this process continued. A new generation of writers emerged, most of whom had little access to much of the most important work of the *origenistas* and the Generation of the 50s until they were in their twenties, when the work of the older poets began to emerge in the form of new publications and new editions of their earlier books, and some of them, including Cintio Vitier, Pablo Armando Fernández, Miguel Barnet, and Nancy Morejón, became members of the ruling elite. Francisco de Oraá, César López, Cintio Vitier, Fina García Marruz, and Antón Arrufat have become elder statesmen of Cuban letters, Piñera has assumed the status of martyr and hero for younger Cuban poets, and Lezama's modest apartment in one of Havana's most dilapidated quarters is now a museum and cultural center.

Even exiles, some of whom, like Baquero, had been written out of history, their names removed from the captions of group photographs, were once again published on the island. Many of them first appeared in *Las palabras son islas*, the first anthology published on the island since the Revolution to include writers in exile. *La patria sonora de los frutos (The Sonorous Homeland of Fruit)*, a large selection of Baquero's poetry, and Kozér's *No buscan reflejarse (They Don't Seek to Be Reflected)*, the first two books by poets of the diaspora to be published in Cuba since the early 1970s, appeared in 2001.⁴¹

In 2000, when I was just beginning to think about the contents of this anthology, I spoke with Roberto Fernández Retamar. "Let me assure you," he told me, "that I have always been and still am a true revolutionary. Nonetheless, you must include Baquero in your anthology." Fernández Retamar always speaks for the regime, and he was signaling a change that would bring the publication on the island of almost every writer of any importance in the diaspora. Many of them had been known to some extent: baggage is rarely inspected for books at Cuban airports, which has meant, for instance, that a few copies of Kozér's books have been in circulation since the early 1980s. By the mid-1990s there was greater access to the Internet, which has meant that Cuban writers are in constant, if guarded, contact, and there are now dozens of ezines and websites, both on- and off-island, allowing access to the work of writers of all camps.⁴²

A major difference in the lives of poets after the 1980s has been the greater ease with which poets who have left the island visit and those who live on the island leave. In the 1990s the Clinton administration greatly liberalized visiting rights for Cubans living in the United States, allowing them to visit the island legally once a year. Temporary U.S. visas for Cuban writers also became relatively easy to attain. The Bush administration enforced the much stricter limit of one visit in three years for Cubans living in the United States (if they have parents, siblings, or children in Cuba), and it virtually eliminated temporary U.S. visas for Cubans resident in Cuba (even for openly dissident writers). Any Cuban who manages to set foot on U.S. soil illegally receives residency for the asking.

From the Cuban side, exit visas, once restricted to writers strongly connected to the regime, have become pro forma for any writer with a cultural or teaching invitation from abroad. Writers who obtain exit visas and then become foreign residents are free to return to the island with no fear of being held, which for many has greatly eased the decision to leave the island.

The regime's apparent liberalization has had a motive. In the financial crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, and with the U.S. embargo still in place, one of Cuba's few potential sources of the hard cur-

rency it has needed to keep the economy running has been tourism, and overt oppression is very bad advertising. And the hard currency that Cubans from abroad have brought with them or sent to their families under somewhat liberalized U.S. rules, as well as the money that Cubans have earned in their travels, enters the government's reserves, because all markets and financial institutions are government-controlled.

This has created a bizarre situation. Cuba now has two currencies—pesos (known as *moneda nacional*, or MN) and convertible pesos—and two economies. Those in the tourist trade, which is run entirely in hard currency (currently euros and Canadian dollars), or who receive remittances or earn money abroad, can convert their hard currency into convertible pesos for otherwise scarce items, or exchange them for MN at twenty-five to one. Salaries continue to be paid in MN. Only with great effort can one find the minimal provisions provided by one's ration book; everything beyond that has been enormously inflated. Those who have a product or service to sell often do so on the black market, for hard currency.

Most Cuban writers are entirely dependent on their peso salaries, which means that their standards of living have fallen catastrophically. And while they suffer less repression than in the past and tend to express their disagreements with the regime more openly, particularly on the Internet, there is still censorship. None of Antonio José Ponte's fiction or his 2004 book of essays *El libro perdido de los origenistas* (*The Lost Book of the Origenistas*) has been published in Cuba, for instance, although they are available elsewhere in several languages. And open dissent has consequences. Ponte has been expelled from UNEAC, which means he can't earn the meager living of a writer in Cuba. In his case the financial loss is inconsequential: his books earn foreign royalties and he has had no trouble attracting invitations from abroad; in fact, he has been a resident of Spain for several years. For most other writers the threat of any loss of income often remains a crucial deterrent. And there's the further threat, evidenced by occasional repressive acts, that an unrestrained government that hasn't been shy about disrupting lives in the past could do so again.

The result has been that poets leave. Of the twenty-one living members of the generations of the 1980s and 1990s included in this anthology, eleven are currently resident abroad and three others have deliberately left their status ambiguous. All managed to leave Cuba legally, with legitimate invitations from foreign cultural institutions in hand, except for one, who claims to have forged his invitation. His success may indicate how casual the regime's oversight has become. Most have settled in Europe or Latin America. A few, after some years in other countries, have become legal residents of the

United States. One crossed the border from Mexico with a *coyote*, becoming a legal immigrant the moment his foot touched U.S. soil.

Poetry of the 1980s and after, both on and off the island, has tended to continue the conversational tradition, though with a far more intimate, personal focus, and frequently a retreat into fantasy or childhood or an imagery of dreams or the surreal reminiscent of Eliseo Diego, upon which are sometimes built layers of subtle irony. Overwhelmingly, there has been a turning inwards toward an often hermetic conversation with the self and away from the public sphere.

But the poets of the 80s, 90s and beyond are an extremely varied group. While many poets on the island have claimed the long-sought territory of the private sphere, by dint of conscious or unconscious self-censorship, as an outsider one could easily miss the presence of a political critique hiding in plain sight. I asked Fernández Larrea about the expletive at the end of “El país de los elfos” (“The Land of Elves”), which appears until that final word to be the narrative of a childhood fantasy: “. . . in the land of elves / damn.” “The land of elves,” he explained, “is something like ‘the promised future, idyllic communism.’”

Similarly, “the cynical head of the crocodile” in Sánchez Mejías’ “Cálculo de lindes” (“A Calculus of Boundaries”) would be instantly recognizable to Cubans as a swipe at Castro: the crocodile has long been a synonym for Cuba, because of its shape on the map.

It would be harder to miss the message within Soleida Ríos’ baroque structures. “The important thing was—is—” she tells us in “Texto sucio” (“Dirty Text”), “that leading such regimented lives we haven’t learned how to live. We haven’t learned . . . We don’t know how to solve the problems of our own lives. Without Divine Intervention. Without A Decision From Above.” A decision from “He Who Is in Charge” in “Gathering Lemons,” the insistence on a nonsensical path in “The Road to the Cemetery.” It would be equally difficult to miss the import of the last two lines of Damaris Calderón’s provocatively titled “This Will Be the Only Lie We’ll Always Believe”: “This is a sad business / this playing at being perfect.”

The *neobarroco* has become again a major influence, certainly on Soleida Ríos’ work, but also on the dense, involuted poetry of Ángel Escobar, and the hallucinatory, driven structures of Raúl Hernández Novás, where Lezama and John Lennon mix as equally the impetus for obsessive exploration.

For one group of poets, including Pedro Marqués de Armas, Rolando Sánchez Mejías, Rogelio Saunders, Ismael González Castañer, and Carlos Alberto Aguilera, the *neobarroco* has been decisive. Like the *origenistas*, they have given themselves a name and created a journal, *Diáspora(s)*, edited by

Sánchez Mejías and Aguilera, seven issues of which appeared between 1996 and 2002. Produced in photocopied editions of never more than a hundred, and without the legally required government sanction, it was never shy about publishing materials that in a previous decade would have led to arrest. Here, for instance, the first paragraph of Saunders' "El Fascismo. Apuntes" ("Fascism. Notes"), which appeared in the second issue: "A State that never wants to appear to be the cause of any evil, that wants to appear to be instead the Great Benefactor, when in reality it is in every instance the *only* cause of the evil that erupts in a million places at once like a huge incurable pustule."⁴³ It would be easy to multiply examples, and the political is rarely absent from the poetry of the *diasporistas*. They reject, in fact, the distinction between the personal and the political as a false dichotomy—theirs is a politically involved reinvention of the *neobarroco*.

Along with Antón Arrufat, Soleida Ríos, Juan Carlos Flores, Omar Pérez López, Antonio José Ponte, Alessandra Molina, and Javier Marimón, the *Diáspora(s)* poets were frequent guests of Reina María Rodríguez' salon, known by its location, her rooftop apartment, *azotea*. In a country where until recently private parties were illegal, its very existence was subversive. It was subversive fun, but also a venue for sharing one's latest writing and ideas, in an environment where the state held no sway.

Despite the addition of a new generation of writers, today the *azotea* is considerably depleted. Rodríguez, Arrufat, Ríos, and Flores remain; the rest have left the island. Ríos expresses the poignancy of being left behind in her "Dirty Text."

A recent controversy about the appearance of three of the key figures in the implementation of the persecutions and censorship of the 1960s and 1970s, in a Cuban television documentary, dramatizes the changing position of writers and intellectuals within the current avatar of the Cuban regime. A very public storm of protest erupted on the Internet and in newspapers and journals around the Spanish-speaking world. Among the most vocal were Arrufat (who had been a victim of those persecutions), Rodríguez, and Ponte. The fear was that the re-emergence of the three ex-officials into public view might be a harbinger of a new round of repression.

The response from the regime was astonishing. In an interview in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* Abel Prieto, Cuba's minister of culture, said that the appearance of the three in the documentary had been a mistake, not a change in cultural policy. He continued, by way of an ingenious reading of Castro's *Palabras a los intelectuales*, "The government of this country now views very critically that period, when we moved away from the cultural politics that the Revolution initiated in 1961, in which artists and writers of

every tendency, of every generation; Catholics, Communists, even honorable nonrevolutionaries, were invited to join the cultural enterprise.⁴⁴ It has apparently become dogma that the years of the worst repression were an aberration.

Signs of change have become commonplace. On October 20, 2007, Antón Arrufat's *Las siete contra Tebas* (*The Seven Against Thebes*), banned in 1968, was performed in Cuba for the first time. A few weeks later, on November 16, Prieto declared on an Internet forum that "there is no censorship of artists and intellectuals" in Cuba.⁴⁵

While his assertion was greeted by titters in some quarters, the regime has undoubtedly allowed larger areas of freedom to writers in recent years, and Prieto's words may come to be true in the near future, but no one, I think, ever forgets that it's the regime that decides what to allow. And while it may appear that this softening of repression is a sign of the regime's impending dissolution, few are assuming that to be the case. On the contrary, it may be that the regime now feels so secure that it no longer needs to control what's written, spoken or published as tightly as it used to. Maybe Cuban writers will become as irrelevant to those in power as their counterparts in the United States.

But no one is making a lot of predictions. One would like to imagine a democratic, prosperous Cuba free of foreign domination or embargo and not dependent economically on either remissions from abroad or the fickle and often degrading demands of a tourist economy, a Cuba in which poets will have the choice of embracing or ignoring the political without compunction. When or if this will happen or if it's even possible—certainly no other country in the Caribbean or Central America has managed it—remains an open question.

What is beyond dispute is that despite enormous pressures Cuban poets have produced a poetic culture of extraordinary wealth and originality that has been largely unavailable to North Americans for far too long.

October 1, 2008

Notes

1. With apologies to Canadian readers, I have used "North American" to indicate a citizen of the United States. Most Latin Americans find it annoyingly presumptuous that we call ourselves Americans to the exclusion of the hemisphere's other inhabitants. Thus far the English language offers no equivalent to the Spanish *estadounidense*, "unitedstatesian."

The primary audience for this introduction (as for the anthology itself) is, of course, North American; I have accordingly focused on issues with which North Americans will find themselves dealing in reading Cuban poetry. I have also focused on Cuba's relation-

ship, cultural and political, with the United States, which has been primary, as Louis A. Pérez has documented for the period 1898 to 1959 in his *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), and which I would contend has been equally dominant since, despite, and, paradoxically, because of the post-1960 U.S. embargo. As evidence, one need look no further than the frequent references within the poems to the English-speaking giant to the north, and the almost total lack of reference to the rest of Latin America.

Cuba has always been awash with the poetry of the rest of Latin America, and in the past its influence has been significant. Since 1944 Cuban poetry has been decidedly an export commodity. No Brazilian, Chilean, or Mexican poet has facilitated paradigm shifts on the island, while Guillén, Lezama, and Kozer have been the instruments of major change on the mainland. And of course Cuba's revolution, widely read as a revolution against U.S. hegemony, has been seen, even by its Latin American detractors, as a second declaration of Latin American independence.

All of this would be subject for another book.

2. Of the anthologies, *Cuban Poetry, 1959–1966*, edited by Claudia Beck, Sylvia Carranza, Heberto Padilla, and Luis Suardíaz (Havana: Book Institute, 1967; there was also a Spanish-French bilingual edition), is overwhelmingly political in intent. Nathaniel Tarn's *Con Cuba: An Anthology of Cuban Poetry of the Last Sixty Years* (London: Cape Goliard & Grossman, 1969) was produced hurriedly as a reaction to the growing awareness of dangers faced by Cuban poets. As its title indicates, Margaret Randall's *Breaking the Silences: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Poetry by Cuban Women* (Vancouver, B.C.: Pulp Press, 1982) leaves out male poets. Lori Marie Carson and Oscar Hijuelos' *Burnt Sugar Cana Quemada: Contemporary Cuban Poetry in English and Spanish* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) consists largely of poems written in English by the U.S.-born children or grandchildren of émigrés. Francisco Morán's *Island of My Hunger: Cuban Poetry Today* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2008) limits itself to poets born since 1950.

3. A brief glance at sixteen anthologies of modern Cuban poetry in Spanish yielded an average of 17 percent women.

4. For a history of race relations in Cuba, see Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). In his otherwise excellent study, de la Fuente fails to mention Gastón Baquero's seminal essays written in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, collected in *Indios, blancos y negros en el caldero de América* (Madrid: Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica, 1991), especially "Hay razos o no hay razos?" (1963) and "El negro en Cuba" (1972).

5. Jorge Luis Morales' anthology *Poesía afroantillana y negrista* (Río Piedras: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1976, 1981, and 2000), one of the standard works on the subject, includes numerous white writers. An indication of cultural differences about race is that this would be inconceivable in an English-language anthology.

6. I refer the reader to the two bilingual collections of Loynaz's poetry: *A Woman in Her Garden: Selected Poems of Dulce María Loynaz*, translated by Judith Kerman (Buffalo, N.Y.: White Pine Press, 2002), and *Against Heaven*, translated by James O'Connor (Manchester, U.K.: Carcanet, 2007). Those knowledgeable about Cuban poetry may wonder at the absence of two important poets, Emilio Ballagas (1908–1954) and José Zacarías Tallet (1893–1989), both of whom continued to publish poetry into the period covered by *The Whole Island*. All of Ballagas' best work was in fact published by 1941; to include his later poetry would have been a disservice to his memory. Tallet, an important influence on Cuban *conversacionalismo* (see below) along with Guillén and Florit, wrote poetry only spo-

radically; most of his work, including all of his best and most influential poems, was produced in the 1930s, when they were widely circulated in newspapers and journals, although Tallet didn't gather them into a book until 1951.

7. José Kozzer, "Martí, una ansiedad," *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* 3 (Winter 1996–1997): 64. See also José Antonio Ponte's discussions of the influence of Martí and Casal in *El libro perdido de los origenistas* (Mexico City: Aldus, 2002).

8. My account of the different schools of Cuban poetry is necessarily brief and perhaps oversimplified. *Vanguardismo*, in particular, involved a lot more than the *conversacionismo* of its final phase. But that's a story for another time. It's worth remembering that discussions of literary taxonomy often shed more heat than light, and that a great many, perhaps most, poets avoid identifying themselves with any school.

9. Heberto Padilla, *Self-Portrait of the Other*, translated by Alexander Coleman (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), p. 29.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

12. José Lezama Lima, "Mitos y cansancio clásico," in *La expresión americana* (Santiago, Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1969), p. 1. The first edition, published in Havana in 1957, is extremely scarce.

13. For an early statement of what became the standard objections to Lezama and the *neobarroco*, and Lezama's customary answers, see Jorge Mañach, "El arcano de cierta poesía nueva. Carta abierta al poeta José Lezama Lima," *Bohemia*, Sept. 25, 1949; and José Lezama Lima, "Respuesta y nuevas interrogantes. Carta abierta a Jorge Mañach," *Bohemia*, Oct. 2, 1949.

14. Haroldo de Campos, "A obra de arte aberta," *Diário de São Paulo*, July 3, 1955. Sarduy wrote exhaustively about the Baroque and the *neobarroco* for several decades. Of special importance is his "Barroco y neobarroco," in César Fernández Moreno, *América Latina en su literatura* (Mexico City: UNESCO/Siglo XX, 1972), pp. 24–27.

15. Useful discussions of the *concordia discors* can be found in C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1964); and Robert E. Stillman, *Sydney's Poetic Justice* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1986). For the concept's neoplatonic origins, see Andrew Scholtz, *Concordia Discors: Eros and Dialogue* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2007).

16. Recounted by David Huerta, in "Trece motivos para Lezama," the introduction to his selected Lezama, *Muerto de Narciso. Antología poética* (Mexico City: Era, 1988), p. 9.

17. For an important reading of the Baroque and the *neobarroco*, though for the most part focused on prose, see Roberto González Echevarría, *Celestina's Brood: Continuities of the Baroque in Spanish and Latin American Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), particularly the last chapter.

Lezama elaborated a complex metaphysical system of the image, the poem, and history, not dealt with here. For an introduction in Lezama's words, see "Interview with José Lezama Lima" by Armando Álvarez Bravo (translated by James Irby), in *José Lezama Lima: Selections*, edited by Ernesto Livon-Grosman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 122–137. For a concise summary of Lezama's system, see Emilio Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 117–120.

18. Lezama Lima, "Mitos y cansancio clásico."

19. Piñera recounts and documents the reasons for his disagreements with Lezama (and their history, dating back to the 1930s) in "Cada cosa en su lugar," *Lunes de Revolución* 39

(Dec. 14, 1959): 11–12. For an anecdotal account of the difficult friendship of Lezama and Piñera, the founding and dissolution of *Orígenes* and *Ciclón*, and the hostility toward Lezama of the group surrounding *Lunes de Revolución*, see the memoirs gathered in Roberto Pérez León, *Tiempo de Ciclón* (Havana: Unión, 1991).

20. See Jason Weiss' encyclopedic *The Lights of Home: A Century of Latin American Writers in Paris* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

21. For an account of *Lunes*, the memories of its publisher, Carlos Franquí, and its editor and assistant editor, Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Pablo Armando Fernández, and a complete table of contents of its 129 issues, see William Luis, ed., *Lunes de Revolución: Literatura y cultura en los primeros años de la Revolución Cubana* (Madrid: Verbum, 2003).

22. "La poesía en su lugar," *Lunes de Revolución* 38 (Dec. 7, 1959): 5–6. This translation, like all translations not otherwise credited, is mine.

23. Pablo Armando Fernández, "Refutación a Vitier," *Ciclón* 4, no. 1 (Jan.–Mar. 1959); translated by Stephen D. Gingerich in *New Centennial Review* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 134–150 (an issue devoted entirely to *Orígenes* and *Ciclón*).

24. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, "Un mes lleno de *Lunes*," in Luis, ed., *Lunes de Revolución*, p. 142.

25. I refer to the Partido Socialista Popular (People's Socialist Party), one of the several Communist parties that had been active in Cuba since the 1920s. In 1962 it was to join with Castro's 26th of July Movement and the Revolutionary Directory March 13th student party to form Cuba's current Communist Party.

ICAIC appears to many as being anomalously liberal, producing films like *Fresa y chocolate* (*Strawberries and Chocolate*, 1994), an international hit that seemed to signal a new openness by the regime to criticism. It should be noted, however, that the film, set ten years in the past, deals with a subject that had become less controversial; its distribution on the island was extremely limited and short-lived; and it was not shown on Cuban television until 2008. Like many of ICAIC's more open films, it was intended primarily for export.

26. "Encuentro de los intelectuales cubanos con Fidel Castro (Fragmentos de la primera sesión), Biblioteca Nacional, La Habana, 16 de junio, 1961," *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* 43 (Winter 2006/2007): 157–175. Among the participants were Baragaño and Padilla. The exchange between Piñera and Castro is on pages 163–164, Castro's reaction continuing until p. 168.

27. Fidel Castro Ruz, *Palabras a los intelectuales* (Havana: Departamento de Ediciones de la Biblioteca Nacional "José Martí," 1991), p. 6, 9–10.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 11, 12–13.

29. My account of the varying status of homosexuals in Cuba is largely drawn from Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

30. Cabrera Infante, "Un mes lleno de *Lunes*," p. 146.

31. The most important documents of the Padilla Affair are included in *Fuera del juego: Edición conmemorativa, 1968–1998* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1998). "Declaración de la UNEAC" is on pp. 115–121.

32. "Dictamen del jurado del concurso de la UNEAC 1968," in *Fuera del juego. Edición conmemorativa*, pp. 87–88.

33. Padilla's account of his imprisonment is in his memoir, *La mala memoria* (1989), translated by Alexander Coleman as *Self-Portrait of the Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), pp. 143–166.

34. *Fuera del juego. Edición conmemorativa*, p. 148. After he delivered his confession, Padilla and Lezama dined together. By all accounts they had become friends before the confession and were to remain so until Lezama's death. Parts of Padilla's memoir read like an apology to Lezama the man, if not Lezama the poet. Piñera and Lezama had reconciled after the publication of *Paradiso* and remained very close, as did Lezama and Pablo Armando Fernández. Words that may seem to us unforgivable are often considerably less so within the context of the unrestrained verbal ferocity of Latin American literary controversies.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

36. Belkis Cuza Malé, *Juego de damas*, 2d ed. (Cincinnati: Termino Editorial, 2002).

37. Jorge Luis Arcos, ed., *Las palabras son islas: Panorama de la poesía Cubana, siglo XX (1900–1998)* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1999)—the essential Cuban anthology.

38. Delfin Prats, *Lenguaje de mudos* (Madrid: El Puente, 1970).

39. Roberto Fernández Retamar, "Calibán. Apuntes sobre la cultura en nuestra América" (1971) and its 1986 appendix, "Calibán revisitado," both included in Edward Baker's translation, "*Caliban*" and *Other Essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

40. Translated by Christopher Leland Winks. See page x.

41. Gastón Baquero, *La patria sonora de los frutos. Antología poética*, edited by Efraim Rodríguez Santana (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2001); José Kozler, *No buscan reflejarse. Antología poética*, edited by Jorge Luis Arcos (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2001).

42. Among the more important of those produced on the island, and very much supportive of the regime, are *Cubaliteraria* (www.cubaliteraria.com) and *La Jiribilla* (www.lajiribilla.cu). On the other side are two of the most important of those produced off-island, *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* (www.cubaencuentro.com/revista; also available in print) and *La Habana Elegante* (www.lahabanaelegante.com), which includes "La azotea de Reina," edited by Reina María Rodríguez. Writers on- and off-island increasingly participate in all of them, and *La Jiribilla* includes on its site a link to *Encuentro*.

43. In *tsé tsé 13*, "ni orden ni desorden," Oct. 2003, p. 31. Pages 3–77 of *tsé tsé 13* are dedicated to *Diáspora(s)*.

44. "Encuentro en la Red," on the *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* website, Mar. 25, 2007. A dossier of the email exchanges is to be found in the print edition of *Encuentro* 43 (Winter 2006/2007): 253–269.

45. For an account of the long-delayed premiere of *Las siete contra Tebas*, see *Encuentro en la Red*, Nov. 21, 2007. For a report of Prieto's declaration, see Cuba-L, <http://cuba-l.unm.edu/?nid=41543&q=prieto&h=>

