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TRANSCENDING EXILE:
CUBAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE TODAY

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PREFACE

Gustavo Pérez Firmat is associate professor of the Department of Romance Languages at Duke University. He is the author of Idle Fictions: the Hispanic Vanguard Novel, 1926-1934 (Duke University Press), Literature and Liminality: Festive Readings in the Hispanic Traditions, and In Other Words: Translation as Cultural Practice in Modern Cuban Literature. His poetry has appeared in numerous anthologies and literary magazines, including Linden Lane Magazine, The Bilingual Review, Término, and Mariel.

This paper is the first of a three-part OPSD series, based on three lectures presented by Pérez Firmat at Florida International University during the summer of 1987.

Richard Tardanico
Editor
Occasional Papers Series Dialogues

TRANSCENDING EXILE: CUBAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE TODAY

No hay que volver.

Eugenio Florit

I will begin with an incident that took place right here at Florida International University. Several months ago I went to the inauguration of the Casa de Cultura Cubana, which is a student organization bent on the preservation and promotion of Cuban culture. I arrived early and when I walked in there a radio was on and it was tuned to WQBA FM, a station that plays both American and Latin music. Right away I felt at home, as if the Casa de Cultura Cubana were also _mi casa_. Once people began to arrive, however, and as the event began to get organized, someone turned the radio off and put on instead a tape of _danzones_. All of a sudden it seemed to me that my _casa_ had turned into a time capsule, and that I was back in Havana--an impression abetted by the fact that on this particular night the room was decorated with paintings of various Havana landmarks. Now even though I was born in Havana and I spent my childhood there, when the music of the _danzones_ came on, I no longer felt like Pérez _por su casa_. My home had become a little unhomely, a little _unheimlich_. My remarks grow out of my need, first to explain, and second to justify, this discomfort at the switch from _salsa_ to _danzón_, from the Miami Sound Machine to the Time Machine; and I will do this by way of a discussion of the difference between Cuban exile and Cuban-American literature. In the end, I want to persuade you that the radio should not have been turned off, that the so-called "sound of Miami" has a place in a house of culture, and even in a _casa de cultura cubana_.

First, I will make some theoretical distinctions. The literature of émigrés can be grouped into one of three categories: immigrant literature, exile literature, and ethnic literature. Each of these groupings has its distinctive characteristics and covers a different body of work. Immigrant literature is written by those who come to this country to settle, without any intention of returning to their country of origin. Resorting to a Spanish distinction, one might say that the immigrant is someone who has decided that his patria can no longer be his país, someone for whom the homeland is not desirable as a home. For this reason, the immigrant writes prospectively, and his literature typically moves away from the language of origin and toward the language of destination. In immigrant writing, the mother tongue is displaced by the other tongue, and this linguistic shift is a symptom of the immigrant's rebirth in his new country. The classic opening of Mary Antin's autobiography, The Promised Land, a title that is already indicative of the prospective tenor of immigrant literature, offers the paradigmatic illustration of this phenomenon:

> I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell. (1)

This conversion, which is almost religious in its intensity and radicalness, is typical of the immigrant experience, but completely foreign to the mentality of the exile. Absolute otherness is precisely what the exile tries to avoid; indeed, he attempts just the opposite, to cement the continuity between his present and former selves by maintaining his otherness toward his new environment; hence the exile's bent to give old names to new places. Unlike the immigrant, the exile is not willing to acknowledge any distance or discontinuity between his patria and his país. Since he looks upon himself as a transient rather than a settler, his literature is

characterized, on the one hand, by a pronounced allergy to cultural acquisitions, and on the other, by a strong fixation on the culture of origin. If immigrant literature is prospective, the literature of exiles is relentlessly retrospective. An extreme example are the words of a well-known Cuban exile writer, who once told me that even if she had lived in the North Pole for twenty years, she would continue to write in Spanish, and she would continue to write in Spanish about Cuba. Another example is the poem that I found not long ago in the pages of the Diario de las Américas:

Mis palmas

Abatida en su verdor escueto,
se dobla de tristeza en el paisaje;
dolor de mi caimán en esqueleto
que rechaza del ruso el vasallaje.

Altiva palma de mi Cuba enajenada,
hincando al cielo con seco llanto,
¡miradla, Señor!, cómo está crucificada
en el siniestro madero del espanto.

Leaving aside the question of literary merit, I find this poem interesting on two counts: first, because of the repeated use of the first person possessive adjective--mis palmas, mi caimán, mi Cuba. This grasping at palm fronds is typical of the exile, but it is a symptom of loss rather than possession. If those palms were really his, there would be no need to assert it so emphatically. The second noteworthy feature is the complementary assertion that it is not the speaker but Cuba that has changed. Although one gets the feeling that when he says that the palm is abatida the real referent is not the palm but the poet; the speaker claims just the opposite: that under the vassaldom of the Soviet Union, Cuba has become emaciated to the point of alienation, of otherness, which is the literal sense of enajenada. Thus it is Cuba, and not the poet, that has been dispossessed. This dual affirmation of personal continuity and national

discontinuity is seen time and again in exile literature. It appears often, for example, in the literature of Spanish émigrés, who used the notion of España Peregrina to designate this phenomenon. Frequently unable to fight for his country's soil, the exile writer fights for his country's soul, a word war whose stakes are often more personal than political.

For the immigrant, destination is destiny: ser is estar. For the exile, destination is not destino but desatino, a kind of topographical accident from which he or she has not recovered. The immigrant lives and resides in the same place. The exile resides in one place and lives in another. Thus, exile literature is typically written in the "mother tongue," since the use of a second language is already an intolerable symptom of cultural dissociation. For the exile writer, life is elsewhere, and his retrospective writing tirelessly rings the changes on the themes of alienation and return, as in the poem we have just discussed.

This brings me to the third category, which is grounded in the notion of ethnicity. Unlike immigrant and exile literature, ethnic literature is neither prospective nor retrospective. The ethnic writer is not interested in assimilation or return; indeed, his work is given over to exploring what it means to refuse both of these options. In other words, if immigrant literature is defined by its otherness with respect to its culture of origin and exile literature by its otherness with respect to its culture of destination, ethnic literature is defined by its otherness with respect to both origin and destination. In spite of their differences, the immigrant and the exile are alike in that both worship sameness: just as the immigrant wants his new país to become his patria, the exile wants his patria to once again be his país. If one identifies with his homeland, the other identifies with his home. The ethnic writer, by contrast, cultivates not identity

but difference. He does not seek to identify either with his culture of origin or with his culture of destination; or rather, he does not seek an exclusive identification with either one of them.

Ethnicity, as I use the term here, consists of the non-conflictive cohabitation of dissimilar cultures. Notice that I say cohabitation rather than synthesis, for it is not clear to me that this cohabitation necessarily engenders a synthetic third term. As Werner Sollors and others have pointed out, ethnicity is less a matter of synthesis than of antithesis.[2] That is to say, it is contrastive, contestatory, and oppositional. What I would stress, though, is that the ethnicity's antithetical force works against the regressive as well as the assimilationist impulse. The ethnic accepts that his _patria_ is not, nor can ever be, his _país_. And what is more, he is not disturbed by this split. Since identity does not interest him, he does not suffer identity crises. Instead, like the amphibian, he revels in his doubleness.

This is one reason that ethnic literature is often multilingual. The ethnic writer, who has no vested interest in the mother tongue or the other tongue, employs what might be termed the "language of opportunity," that is, the linguistic modality that best expresses his position between cultures. If exile literature is written generally in the language of origin and immigrant literature in the language of destination, ethnic literature is written in one or the other or in varying combinations of the two, depending on the circumstances. An ad that appears regularly in the local magazine _Miami Mensual_ carries the caption, "Sometimes, the American Dream is written in Spanish." For the ethnic writer the key word here is not "American" or "Dream" or "Spanish" but "Sometimes"; as an informed consumer in the

linguistic marketplace, he retains the option, and cultivates the ability, to pick his words.

Given this tripartite scheme, the question I should like to ask now is the following: where should one place the literary production of Cuban exiles, and particularly of the Miami branch (or rather the Miami trunk) of the Cuban exile community? The terms of the question already provide the answer: I do not think that there is much doubt that, for the past twenty-five years or so, the literary production of Cubans residing in this county and this country has fallen mainly into the mold of exile literature. By and large, the Miami Cuban writer has looked upon himself as just a man passing through, and his literary output, written mostly in Spanish, has adopted the tone and content of exilic discourse. As Boswell and Curtis note in their recent book, <u>The Cuban-American Experience</u>, while there is a distinctive and substantial corpus of Cuban-American art and music, there is hardly any Cuban-American literature to speak of.[3] Unlike painters and musicians, the Cuban-American writer, with a few notable exceptions, has not made the transition from exile to ethnic, from <u>cubanazo</u> to spic. In order to verify this it is enough to peruse the shelves of Salvat's bookstore on Eighth Street. Undoubtedly the shelves of La Universal include many interesting works; there is also no question about the sincerity of their authors.

Nevertheless, two things do need to be said, gently. The first is that in spite of the number of poems and novels that have emanated from Miami for almost three decades, the Miami Cuban writer has yet to produce one truly memorable work of imaginative literature. The second is that, after twenty-five years, the thematics of exile has become not only chronic but anachronic--especially for those of us who arrived in this country many years ago,

possibly when we were children. For this generation, exile has become a comfortable cliché, a kind of political and literary habit. And the habit may make the monk, but it does not make the writer. There are many reasons, and there are even more excuses, to explain our fixation on the thematics of exile. An obvious one is that for someone who works with language, crossing over, or even hedging, is extraordinarily difficult. A painter who arrives in this country does not need to get a new palette in order to continue to function as an artist. To a lesser extent perhaps, the same thing is true of the musician, who can also rely on the relative universality of his expressive medium. Not so with the exile writer, however, whose use of a foreign language makes his survival as a writer difficult--not only because it restricts his readership but also, and more importantly, because he now has to apprehend a reality that exists in a language other than his own. In such circumstances it is understandable that he would be predisposed toward the mood and the mode of exile.

Yet, it seems to me, that precisely if one wants to survive as a writer, at some point one has to transcend this condition; one has to face the fact that, after twenty-five years, the rags of exile may not be our strongest suit. Again, I am speaking first of all for myself, and secondly for the so-called Miami generation, Cubans who are now in their twenties and thirties and who arrived in this country during the 1960s and 70s. What this generation has to realize is that, even if we were born in Cuba, we were made in the USA, and that even if Cuba was our primera casa, Miami is our permanent home. And that makes us something other than Cuban and other than American--which is what I have called ethnic. For us, the hyphen is not a minus sign but a plus, a sign of life, a vital sign. For us, hyphenation is oxygenation--a breath of fresh air into a dusty and musty casa. My

point is simply that for the Cuban-American writer life is elsewhere indeed, but that elsewhere is not Havana or even Little Havana; it is rather the whole physical and cultural environment he inhabits, and which reaches well beyond Calle Ocho. We have been living in exile long enough, the plumbing is beginning to creak, it is time to move. The literature that will emerge from our relocation will of course not disregard the pain of exile, but neither will it turn it into a fetish. It will be a literature that supposes but also surpasses exile, a literature where exile shades into exhilaration. It is not a matter of forgetting Cuba, but of remembering that, as someone once said, "here we are, and if we tarry a little, we may come to learn that here is best."

Now in making this transition from exile to ethnicity, Cuban-American writers can derive instruction and inspiration from two principal sources: one is Cuban-American pop culture; the other is the literature of other U.S. Hispanics. Let me briefly discuss each of these, beginning with the former. Although it is certainly the case that, up to now, there has been little of what one might term Cuban-American literature, there is no doubt that for many years there has been a living and breathing Cuban-American culture. What happens is that this culture is not high-brow or artsy or literary. Rather than a culture of creators, it is a culture of consumers; rather than a culture of museums, concerts, and book fairs, it is a culture of shopping malls, restaurants, and discotheques--a culture defined by a way of dressing and dancing and driving, one that expresses itself, not in self-conscious novels or in experimental theater, but in fashion and food, in jewelry and jacuzzis, and in advertising slogans and in popular music. I have lived in Miami long enough, and I have lived away from Miami long enough, to see it everywhere I go: a certain sense of style, Cuban-American style, which is

characterized by a fascinating mixture of crass and class, of _kitsch_ and _caché_.

What can the exile writer learn from Cuban-American style? For one thing, he or she can learn the art of the cultural oxymoron. Because ethnicity, as I am employing the term, resides in the non-conflictive cohabitation of disparate elements, it is characterized by doubleness, and even by duplicity. The ethnic, to put it a different way, is someone who always has his fingers in more than one melting pot. Let me give you an example of what I mean. The other night I was at a discotheque not too far from here called The Banana Boat, which I understand is also known among the natives as "El platanito de Kendall." We had gone to see Willie Chirino, who as you know is a popular Cuban-American singer, and something like the Per Abbat of the YUCAS (Young Urban Cuban Americans). In the course of the evening Chirino went through his usual repertoire--"Soy," "Castígala," "Wilfredo el mago," "Zarabanda," "El collar de Clodomiro," and so on. Somewhat to my surprise, however, he also played a traditional Cuban _son_ by Miguel Matamoros called "El son de la loma." Now, as Severo Sarduy realized when he borrowed one of his titles from Matamoros' lyric, this song is really an ontological meditation on the essence of _cubanía_, a kind of tropical _Sein und Zeit_, and thus it appropriately begins with a question, "mamá yo quiero saber de dónde son los cantantes, que los veo muy galantes y los quiero conocer."[4] The speaker wants to know where Cubans are coming from; his is a question about origins, about grounds, about identity, and it is therefore addressed to his mother. In the song, however, the question is answered ambiguously, since the paradox about _los cantantes_ is that "son de la loma" but "cantan en llano." Which is a way of saying, perhaps, that displacement is natural to Cubans, and that, for example, it should not seem

so strange to hear El son de la loma played in a banana boat in Kendall. But what was memorable in Chirino's rendition of this son was not only the place but the players. As it turned out, in the audience that night was José Fajardo, a famous musician in pre-Castro Cuba, who went up on the stage, took out his flute, and proceeded to accompany Chirino in playing this number. What then followed was a Son de la loma memorable for the counterpoint between Chirino's keyboard and Fajardo's flute. Given that this musical miscegenation was taking place only a few blocks from Loehman's Plaza, in my mind the Son de la loma became the Song of Loehman's, and as such a moving, melodious emblem of the odd couplings that make up ethnic culture--not a "Cuban Counterpoint," as in Fernando Ortiz's famous book, but a "Cuban-American Counterpoint." Remember a plaintive melody of years ago called El son se fue de Cuba? Well, that night I found out where the son went after it left Cuba--to Kendall.

The problem, as I have already said, is that oxymorons like these are easier to compose when one is a painter or a musician than when one is a writer. But here is where chicano and newyorikan writers have much to teach us. From them we can learn how to give voice to our doubleness, how to become "cunning linguals," in the ingenious phrase of El Huitlacoche, a chicano poet whose work I admire.[5] It is important to stress, however, that being a cunning lingual does not simply mean mixing languages, although it is certainly true that sometimes the Cuban-American dream is written in Spanglish. Cunning lingualism has to do rather with knowing how to exploit the distance that separates us from both Spanish and English. Linguistically to lose one's place is to gain an edge. As Adorno once remarked, "only he who is not truly at home inside a language can use it as an instrument."

And it is no accident that many of the great writers of this century--from Beckett to Borges to Bobby Fernández--have trafficked in multiple tongues.

Let me conclude by discussing a little tongue-twisting text that exemplifies what I am talking about. I refer to the jingle of the radio station WQBA FM (the so-called "Super-Q"), a text which to my mind is one of the seminal works of Cuban-American literature:

> Super Q, I love you,
> la mejor música la tocas tú.

First, I will make a few contextualizing remarks. When Super-Q went on the air in April 1979, this was its slogan, and it was sung in the voices of the Miami Sound Machine, back in the days when the machine was still in local operation. The jingle is still being played today. Now, to my knowledge, Super-Q is the only station in Miami that has ever tried to capitalize on the hybridness of its audience by playing top-forty American as well as Latin music. What makes this especially suggestive is the fact that Super-Q's sister station on the AM band is none other than WQBA, La Cubanísima, the paradigm of Cuban radio programming in Miami--the kind of programming ridiculed some years ago with the slogan, "más música y menos bla-bla-blá." One might say that if Super-Q cooks the <u>salsa</u>, La Cubansima chews the fat. The station's nickname, Super-Q, is already significant: I do not know who thought it up or why, but I like to read it as a malicious gesture of Cuban-American oneupmanship. If WQBA is the <u>cubanísima</u>, the station more Cuban than which none can be conceived, its FM twin is none other than Super-Q, Super-Cuba. Hyperbole against hyperbole, hype against hype, Super-Q counters the bombast (not to mention the <u>bombas</u>) of its sister station by saying, in effect: the way to be super-Cuban is not to cling to one's roots, but to welcome transplantation; <u>cubanía</u> is not a matter of

roots but of routes; what defines us is not the place where we stop but the place where we step, not a land but a landing.

Now for the promotional purposes of the station, this odd couplet is an ingenious way of conveying the musical hybidrity of its programming without saying it explicitly. By personifying the station and addressing it as both a _you_ and a _tú_, the jingle says: look, we are as Cuban as _tú_ and as American as _you_. Like us, because we are like you. As befits an ethnic product, the jingle capitalizes on doubleness: it has its _coquito_ and eats it too. It does so even phonically. The gist of the jingle is the rhyme between _tú_ and _you_ and _Q_, which stands for Cuba. But in which language do we make the rhyme? Given that the jingle contains both Spanish and English, do we say the phrase with an American or with a Cuban pronunciation? Is it "Super-Qú" or "Super-Qiú"? Notice that when we say it in English, we tend to distort the sound of _tú_ by pronouncing it something like "tiú." And when we say it in Spanish, we tend to hispanicize _you_, which then is pronounced something like "yú." But that double inflection is precisely the point, that English only is just as insufficient as Spanish only. There is one other rhyming word that figures prominently in this poem, although it is never mentioned: the word is the numeral _two_. In the lingo of my profession, one would say that this numeral is the semantic matrix of the text, which can be looked upon as variations on the motif of twoness. Since we are _tú_ as well as _you_, we are double; since we love in English, but we play in Spanish, we are double; since we have alma de rock and corazón de bolero, we are double. In sum: we are two.

Let the Cuban-American writer take his cue from Super-Q: only by becoming double, can he ever be whole; only by being two, will he ever be someone.

NOTES

1. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), p. xii. Antin was a Russian-Jewish immigrant.

2. See Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), especially pp. 26-40.

3. Thomas D. Boswell and James R. Curtis, *The Cuban-American Experience* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), p. 151.

4. For an enlightening discussion of this song, see Roberto González Echevarría, *La ruta de Severo Sarduy* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Norte, 1987), pp. 102-107.

5. From a poem entitled, "Searching for La Real Cosa," in *Five Poets of Aztlán*, ed. Santiago Daydí-Tolson (Binghamton, New York: Bilingual Press, 1985), pp. 98-102.