Surviving (on) the Soup of Signs

Postmodernism, Politics, and Culture in Cuba

by
Catherine Davies

> To embrace politics in a postmodern sense is to place a stake on contingency, on the insight that power, no matter how grounded in "reality," how seemingly bound to "material" necessity, is up for grabs, movable and therefore removable.
>
> —Michael Ryan, "Postmodern Politics"

From sociological and epistemological positions, at least, postmodernism[1] is largely resisted and contested in Cuba today, but in the arts its impact has been much stronger. In this article I address ways in which we might think about this situation. The title of the article is taken from Antonio Benítez Rojo's study, informed by chaos theory, of Caribbean culture, first published in 1989. Benítez Rojo's term "soup of signs" refers to the region's "complex cultural spectrum" (1992 [1989]: 269). Caribbean space "is saturated with messages—'language games', as Lyotard would call them . . . the spectrum of Caribbean codes is so varied and dense that it holds the region suspended in a soup of signs" (1992: 2). What is of interest is the way these slippery signs are being brought into play in Cuba today—to cover up a multiplicity of sins, perhaps, but also to recharge an institutionalized discourse with new signification.

In view of the island's special history, to what extent is Cuban postmodernism sui generis? If, simplifying greatly, we accept the broad consensus according to which the narratives of realism and modernity are challenged by modernism and the avant-garde (1920s-1930s) and these in turn by postmodernism (1960s-1990s), then clearly Cuba presents a different story. The epochal shift or postmodern break is often dated around 1960: since 1945 for Lyotard (1986 [1979]), after 1960 for Jameson (1984),[2] a historical conjuncture located between the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the global missile crisis of 1962. But in contrast to the advanced capitalist societies postrevolutionary Cuba did not enter a phase of postmodern disenchantment; quite the contrary. I would argue that after verging on nuclear holocaust,

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having faced the terror of the unthinkable, Cuban society experienced a rerun of the realism-modernism-avant-garde sequence, the avant-garde being represented by the new critical cultural forms of the late 1980s. It is as if the Cuban social totality switched from one master narrative to another, from a capitalist to a noncapitalist version of modernity, precisely when the West shifted toward the postmodern. As Giddens (1990: 47) writes, "scarcely anyone today seems to identify post-modernity with what it was once widely accepted to mean, the replacement of capitalism by socialism." There might be, then, two postmodern moments in Cuba, both located at the disjunction between one grand narrative and another. The first occurs briefly around 1960 (capitalism/Marxism) and the second, more sustained, after the economic crisis of 1992 (Marxism/capitalism).

A novel that captures precisely the limbo or void of being caught between two worldviews is Edmundo Desnoes's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1967), translated by the author as *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1971 [1968]) and turned into a film of the same name (1968) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. Desnoes's pseudo-intellectual protagonist, marooned in revolutionary Cuba, feels no nostalgia for the demise of a moribund bourgeois lifestyle, yet he is out of place in the new regime and exhibits incredulity with regard to all metanarratives. Throughout the novel he bemoans his sense of inferiority and his country's underdevelopment, represented in the scene of fashionable Cuban women eating black beans (Desnoes, 1971 [1968]: 24-25):

> A good bowl of black beans, even if they still have to be civilized, is always a tasty treat. It's like everything else round us; it's sunk in underdevelopment. Even our feelings are underdeveloped: joy and sorrow are primitive and direct here, they haven't been worked on by culture. The revolution is the only complicated thing that has hit Cubans over the head. But many years will have to pass before we catch up with modern industrialzed countries. For me it's already too late. Rimbaud has less right than I to exclaim: Il m'est bien évident que j'ai toujours été race inférieure.

His girlfriend "can't relate to things. Another sign of underdevelopment" (1971 [1968]: 44); Cuba is no more than "a bad copy of the powerful civilized countries, a caricature, a cheap reproduction" (1971 [1968]: 59). Yet when faced with the threat of sudden annihilation, brought on paradoxically by the introduction to Cuba of the most advanced technology, the protagonist finds himself in a postmodern void: "It's a silence that first appears as terror, terror in the face of emptiness, silence; and I couldn't go on" (1971 [1968]: 106).

Later, after the crisis, he rejects modernity in no uncertain terms (1971 [1968]: 122, 126):

> We're already a modern country, we have twentieth-century weapons, atomic bombs, we're no longer an insignificant colony, we're already rushed into history. . . . Never have we been so important nor more miserable. Fighting the United States—we're so small—might have a touch of greatness but I reject that fate. I would rather go on being underdeveloped. Not interested, a fate that must face death each minute is not for me. Revolutionaries are mystics of this century: willing to die for an implacable social justice. I'm a mediocre man, a modern man, a link in the chain, a worthless cockroach.

The anxious author/intellectual and *Memorias* itself are then mockingly mirrored in the double "Eddy" and his "so naïve" (1971 [1968]: 65) prizewinning novel.

The Marxist narrative having been legitimated in Cuba (1960-1990), a postmodern response is to be found not there but in the diaspora. Postmodern works are those written or published outside Cuba, principally by Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Severo Sarduy (the Cuban writers listed by Raymond L. Williams [1995] in his study of the postmodern novel in Latin America).[3] The postmodern paradigm seems particularly appropriate, however, to the Cuba of the 1990s, following the rapid delegitimation of Marxism.[4] Indeed, the state had been "losing [its] attraction" (Lyotard, 1986 [1979]: 14) since the 1980s, but it was not until the economic crash of 1992, at a moment of profound collective trauma and disbelief, that alternative stories appeared in public culture. As old sureties failed, no epistemic alternative appeared in what is an archetypal postmodern situation.

Is there, then, a postmodern culture in contemporary Cuba? For Lyotard, a postmodern work must show no nostalgia for metanarratives, whether regarding content or form; it "denies itself the solace of good form, the consensus of good taste" (1986 [1979]: 81). My contention is that while literary postmodernism continues in the Cuban diaspora (for example, in the work of Reinaldo Arenas), postmodern expression in Cuba is that which not only challenges Marxist modernity (thus functioning as a neo-avant-garde) but *at the same time* mocks those very challenges, thus parodying the forms that critiques of Marxism have taken. In other words, a postmodern text would not only present a gay protagonist who questions revolutionary discourse (Gutiérrez Alea's *Fresa y chocolate* is not a postmodern film) but that very strategy would itself be lampooned, as for example, in Reinaldo Arenas's

(1992) tragically hyperbolic *Antes que anochezca* (published in Spain). By the same token, a postmodern thriller would not be one in which a detective investigating the murder of a transvestite undercovers corruption in the Cuban government; the narrative role of that police officer/writer and his problematical identity would itself be constantly undermined, as in Leonardo Padura Fuentes's (1997) best-seller *Máscaras* (published in Cuba and Spain). A young woman would not just challenge a perverse patriarchal tyranny; the whole endeavor would need to be rendered ludicrous and distasteful, as in Daniel Díaz Torres's (1991) film *Alicia en el pueblo de maravillas*. Reinaldo Monteros's (1995) play *Los equívocos morales* not only questions contemporary Cuban society but ridicules and satirizes the agents of that criticism. Similarly, the paintings and sculptures of Juan Francisco Elso and José Bedia exchange the "signifiers and techniques" of "high" art for those of popular culture and the mass media (Mosquera, 1997-1998: 75-84). All these forms of cultural expression involve varying degrees of deconstruction, irony, parody, and pastiche; all efface the line that separates art from life; all are acutely aware of their own presuppositions.

Lyotard's "agnostics" or jousting has begun to take place in Cuba only very recently, but the fact that this is happening, that the Cuban arts have engaged with the resignification of reality, is restoring Marxism from a totalizing narrative to a form of critical thought.

THE VIEW FROM OUTSIDE

A cartoon published in the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* (December 22, 1997) referring to the reintroduction of the official celebration of Christmas in postrevolutionary Cuba depicts the following scene (see Figure 1): Fidel Castro, sitting comfortably on the knees of one of the Three Kings, puffs at his cigar like an overgrown kid and reads out his interminable wish-list:

> This year, as I have been a very good Comandante, I want Yankee imperialism to collapse, Clinton to catch nettlerash, Mickey Mouse to be caught by the Clintons' cat, Cabrera Infante's latest book to be a sales disaster, and I also want Wall Street to crash and . . .

One of the kings groans to himself in despair, "When Castro said that Christmas would return to Cuba I didn't think we'd have to swallow one of his famous speeches." The cartoon juxtaposes a series of unexpected, anachro-

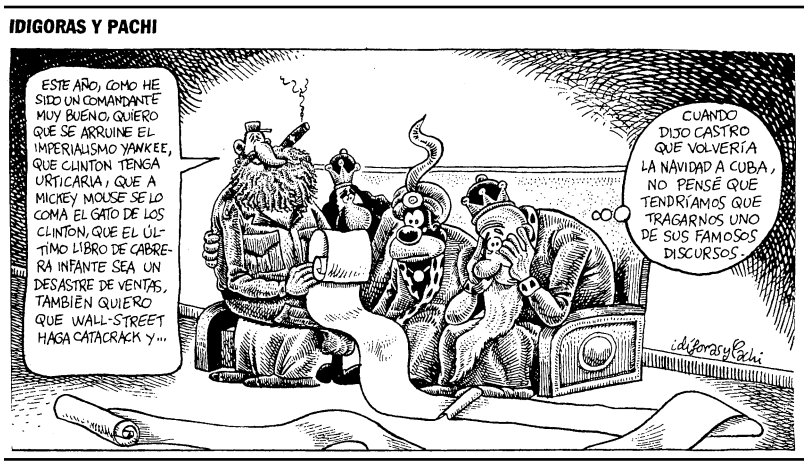

Figure 1: From *El Mundo* (December 22, 1997)

nistic icons indicating kingship (crowns), Catholicism (los Reyes Magos, not Santa Claus), armed revolution (khakis), Cuba (cigar), and the lengthy blank spool, or spiel, replacing the more appropriate red carpet. Fidel's positioning, protected by yet dominating the group of celebrities, is ambiguous. The picture suggests that Castro may well be in the lap of the Church (Christendom and the West), which embraces him, but he dictates the terms.

A more recent cartoon, published in Spain's *El País* (April 2, 1998), refers to the reestablishment of sound diplomatic relations between Cuba and Spain due to pressure from the Spanish Socialist party leader, Joaquín Almunia (see Figure 2). Relations had foundered in 1996 when Aznar's right-wing government ended the period of intense rapport between Cuba and Socialist Spain, thus threatening the Spanish commercial investment that had helped rescue the former colony from economic collapse following the Torricelli-Helms-Burton trade offensive. Aznar shouts to Fidel across the Atlantic, across the ideological gulf that separates them, "Be happy, Fidel! I'm now going to give you an ambassador!" Fidel, on his knees, perched precariously on his rock and wielding rosary beads, exclaims, "Praise be to God, Almunia, Clinton, and the pope!" Again, discordant religious, political, and revolutionary icons, discourses, and proper names (Aznar, Castro, God, Almunia, Clinton, and the pope) are juxtaposed.

A further example is the theatrical mise-en-scène set up in Havana's Revolution Square for the pope's visit (January 21-25, 1998): the mural of the

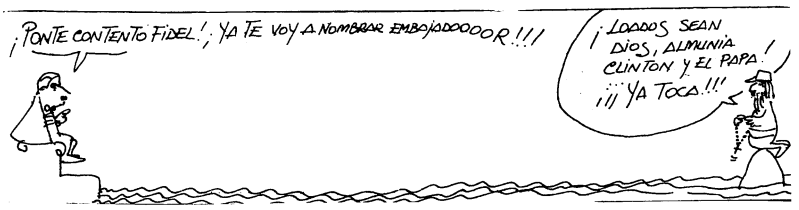

Figure 2: From *El País* (April 2, 1998)

Sacred Heart covering the entire façade of the National Library; Jesus standing at one end of the square, the enormous portrait of Che Guevara at the other, surrounded by fairy lights, and, in the middle, the statue of the national hero José Martí. The spectacle might be interpreted as an empty gesture: "Where the spectacle is justified by the spectacular, and the spectacular according to the spectacle" (Umbral, 1998). But this public display of kitsch, a truly collective performance in which the pope, reciting his operatic *scena*, takes the stage before 200,000 flag-waving people, would seem to instantiate yet again Carpentier's *real maravilloso*: collective catharsis, not functioning at the level of the artificially juxtaposed umbrella, sewing machine, and dissecting table but enacting, enjoying, the sublimation of the clash of the apparently incommensurable as a part of everyday life. From a European perspective, life in Cuba is surreal.[5] Of course, syncretic or teleological readings of all these jarring forms of cultural production are possible in terms of ideology, religion, and politics: the images might be read as referring to the reconstruction of an (aberrant) Cuban national identity within the Catholic-Hispanic fold, to liberation theology, or simply to an "opening of opportunities for dialogue" (*El País*, April 2, 1998). But these readings miss the point, or rather, to paraphrase Iris Zavala, they are the very points, the nodal *points de capiton* (quilting points), that appropriate and fix meaning too soon; as Zavala reminds us, the struggle for power is the "struggle for the sign" (1997: 127-139).[6]

As an example of postmodern practice making space for the free play of meaning, Benítez Rojo (1992 [1989]: 12-16) deconstructs the syncretic-nationalist version of the cult of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre to show how each of the (Taino-European-African [Atabey-Our Lady-Oshun]) elements of the sutured image is itself an unstable syncretism of further

signifiers in endless play. He asks Cuban readers to "abandon their [national] ego" and venture "along the roads of limitless chaos" (1992 [1989]: 13) in pursuit of difference. As we shall see, few Cubans are prepared to do this.

POSTMODERNITY: THE WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

Theories of postmodernity have been cautiously presented in cultural reviews such as *Casa de las Américas*,[7] *Criterios*, and *Temas*. The Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova, for example, in a talk entitled "Nuevas formas de pensar en el mundo actual," urged young Cubans to read widely (Weber, Durkheim, Hegel, Adam Smith, and Talcott Parsons), as well as to reengage with Latin American authors such as José Martí, but he failed to explain why this might be a useful procedure and made no mention of the postmodern (González Casanova, 1992: 2-12). The cultural theory journal *Criterios* (edited by Desiderio Navarro since it was founded in 1982) has devoted its "cuarta etapa" (1994-) to the diffusion of key theoretical texts translated into Spanish, often by Navarro himself. Authors of note writing on postmodernity include Bourdieu, Foster, Morawski, Fischer-Lichte, and Clifford, but no excerpts from the work of Baudrillard and Lyotard appear, the selected texts function more as highlights than as sustained argument, there is a clear bias toward Eastern European thought, and the journal costs US$10 since 1994, thus removing it from the reach of the vast majority of Cubans and perpetuating the mass/elite dichotomy.[8]

One of the few books published in Cuba on the subject is *El postmodernismo: Esa fachada de vidrio* (1994). It was written by two Cuban philosophers (in their early 30s), Lidia Cano (who graduated in philosophy in Moscow in 1986) and Xiomar García. Its title is taken from Habermas's imperative to shatter the glass façade. The book was written in response to a lecture given by the Argentinian philosopher Arturo Andrés Roig at the Universidad Central de las Villas in 1993 entitled "La concepción de la historia en el desarrollo de nuestro pensamiento: Respuesta a los posmodernos desde América Latina."[9] Despite their readings of works by Foucault, Foster, Lyotard, and Vattimo, the authors dismiss postmodernism out of hand. They confirm Jameson's view that it is a product of late capitalism, associated with nihilistic social movements "the most notorious evidence for which appeared with the yuppies-hippies" (Cano and García, 1994: 14). Postmodernism, they argue, is not reflexive or revolutionary but self-sufficient, pessimistic,

skeptical and irrational, and it ignores the class struggle and social injustice. Vattimo and Lyotard may well criticize Stalinization, but neither engages with "real socialism" (1994: 16). Postmodernism challenges capitalism but is evidently nostalgic for capitalism's return. Above all, postmodernism is out of touch with contemporary reality and the recrudescence of social inequality: "It doesn't manage to capture those crucial moments that humanity is living through today. It does not understand reality" (1994: 24). If communication and information technology are the solution (presumably the authors are referring to Lyotard's view that "public free access to the memory and data banks" is "a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown" (1986 [1979]: 67), then clearly this argument cannot apply to the Third World (Cano and García, 1994: 20). In short, the production of postmodern theory is "the property of the intellectual elite" (1994: 23) and no substitute for the socialization of production: "Postmodernism has dazzled contemporary intellectuals, but its brilliance only reveals a sordid demonstration of the decadent world of today" (1994: 24). This view accords with that of other Latin American historical materialists, for example, the Chilean Hernán Vidal (in post in the United States), for whom the postmodern is a "theoretical diversion, an ideological trap, and a waste of time" (1993: 203-227).

A more nuanced view was offered by the Cuban historian and art critic Iván de la Nuez (previously a professor at the Instituto Superior de Arte, Havana) in his article "Occidente y periferia: La cuerda floja y la cadena perpetua," published in *Plural* (July 1992). He posed the paradox whereby Latin Americans (like postmodernists) are unmodern not because of the surfeits (*los hartazgos*) of modernity but because of modernity's lack of nourishment (*desnutriciones*). For de la Nuez the nub of the question is that while postmodernism might be conducive to decentering, new horizons, decolonization, and freedom, inherent in it is the dispersal of identity. The result is a feeling of existing in an atemporal limbo: "It is not a now/already but it's not a *yet to be* either. A singular and paradoxical condition. . . . The sensation is of already being at a point where we haven't yet arrived" (1992: 54-55). He argues for a reformulation of identity on the basis of these differences (1992: 53-54): "We must distance ourselves from dominant metanarratives but also avoid dominated metanarratives. . . . the question of *origins* is reformulated and integrated in an emancipatory strategy that looks toward the future." De la Nuez was evidently nostalgic in this piece for the lost Marxist narrative, and his position was not then radically postmodern. (For his more radical recent views see his *La balsa perpetua* [1998: esp. 45-65]. The book was published when this article was in press.)

More assertive (and Cuba-oriented) is the Cuban essayist Enrique Hernández Busto in "Signos de la isla," also published in 1992. Skepticism in Cuba, he writes, is due to the failure to materialize of the Marxist utopian *telos*, the happy ending to the Cuban story; it is always displaced and deferred. The elusive product of scientific socialism has been replaced by public spectacle and rhetoric, "the theatricality *inherent* in the crisis of political representation" (Hernández Busto, 1992: 27, my emphasis). This results in ritualized carnival; the revolution institutionalizes carnival, appropriates and disarms alterity: "the carnival returns to the Father, it loses its disseminating condition" (1992: 27). This position voices the disenchantment with modernization and, more dramatically, as the Chilean Norberto Lechner suggests, the disenchantment with redemption itself. For Hernández Busto Cuban revolutionary ideology has assumed not the Weberian Protestant work ethic but the ethos of Catholic Messianism and self-sacrifice: "The idea of the chosen people and certain salvation. . . . our modernity has been a continuous crisis of sacrifice" (Hernández Busto, 1992: 28).

Significantly, these two articles that clearly engage with the postmodernism debate in Latin America were published not in Cuba but in a special issue devoted to Cuba of the Mexican journal *Plural* (July 1992). The journal was widely circulated on the island in the first months of the special period. Four years later, however, the Cuban philosopher Paul Ravelo (1996), in his essay (published in Cuba) "De la modernidad a la posmodernidad," surveyed the two-phased challenge to modern rationality—the earlier critiques (from Marx and through Nietzsche to the Frankfurt School) and the later (post- 1960s) postmodern critique—and finally focused on Lyotard, Vattimo, and Habermas. He asked whether postmodernism was reactionary in being depoliticized or whether it offered an opportune theoretical-critical alternative to the process of modernization. Postmodern decentering had separated artists from basic humanist values, he argued, and these values had been replaced by mysticism, myth, and style. The modern cultural vanguard was atomized and disordered. This development was positive in that it recognized multiple differences, but "Careful!" he warned, the explosion of experience (of subject histories, cultures, and languages), the celebration of the end of dogma, and the revitalization of the margins were taking place at the same time that capitalism was rallying an economic, political and cultural dominance that showed no signs of abating (Ravelo, 1996: 85):

> Let's not deceive ourselves. . . . the decentering crisis of the Western cultural "self" and its apparent sympathy for new "social imaginaries," can only be understood in a semantic sense; its categories are spoken, inasmuch as they are limited to the level of the *word* . . . and not to the self-realization of the subject.

Quoting Nelly Richard (1991), he criticized the center for projecting its own "crisis" elsewhere and converting this into another universal metanarrative. Nevertheless, he conceded, this very process might enable peripheral cultures, newly conscious of their role of "other," to reconfigure their relationship with modernity. Paradoxically, globalization and the transnational movement of economic and intellectual capital might bring about the modernization of the periphery.

In sum, from the point of view of sociological and epistemological legitimation, postmodernity has not been welcomed in Cuba. Some dismiss its language games as irrelevant, irreverent posturing at a time of practical necessity; for others it constitutes a real threat, the latest capitalist ploy to bring about the collapse of revolutionary politics; still others engage with it cautiously, hoping it will broaden the theoretical parameters for productive debate, but even they suspect that it comes as a ferociously reactionary wolf dressed in the clothing of intellectual sheep.

POSTMODERN CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Postmodern "events" (Lyotard, 1986 [1979]: 81) have taken place in Cuba in the areas of performance, ritual, and iconography. The impact of postmodernism in the arts since 1990 has been significant, indicating the progressive autonomy of the cultural and political spheres. At base is a crisis of confidence in the Cuban "supreme fictions"—a loss of faith in the state and the revolutionary ethic (undermined by revelations of corruption, personal ambition, and imposture). The correction of past mistakes—what Fidel Castro, in his speech welcoming the pope, allegedly called "correct[ing] the errors we made in correcting our errors" (*Time*, January 26, 1998, 19)—has led to a deregulation of national-revolutionary discourse and the emergence of heterodoxy, self-reflection, and dispersion. The aim of the state is to assimilate these differences where possible, to accommodate the new dynamic into a metadiscourse in need of resignification.

Postmodern aesthetics in Cuba privilege heterogeneity and subjectivity; a critical awareness of sexuality, sexual preference, and sexual discrimination; a reassessment of existing "minority" cultures (women, gay culture); the creation of new styles ("freakies," *roqueros*); an engagement with concomitant issues (private sex life of individuals, domestic life, AIDS); a reencounter with belief systems other than Marxism (primarily Catholicism and radical

Christian sects); a deconstruction of sacred myths (syncretisms); and, most important and perhaps most dangerous for the present government, a querying of national borders in order to incorporate the (Miami) diaspora. Mario Conde, the detective-protagonist of Padura Fuentes's novel *Máscaras*, describes a party scene in which the various new transgressive Cuban identities are performed (Padura Fuentes, 1997: 143-144):[10]

> Activists in favour of free sex, of nostalgia and red, green and yellow parties . . . gays of all categories and affiliation . . . nihilists converted to Marxism and Marxists converted to shit; people with all kinds of chips on their shoulders: sexual, political, economic, psychological, social, cultural, sports, electronic . . . practitioners of Zen Buddhism, Catholicism, witchcraft, voodoo, Islam, Santeria, a Mormon and two Jews . . . admirers of Pablo Milanés and enemies of Silvio Rodríguez . . . the repatriated and patriots; the expelled from every possible place you can be expelled from . . . .

From a feminist point of view, the decentering of the prototypical macho protagonist of the revolutionary epic has been crucial. One of the most convincing arguments in favor of postmodern art, for example, was published by a female art professor in a *Temas* issue dedicated to women's writing and feminist criticism (Jubrías, 1996). An awareness of the dearth of literary publications by women and women-centered studies was made apparent in the mid-1980s, but only in the early 1990s did the rumblings of discontent have an impact on cultural institutions (Davies, 1997: 122-144). Luisa Campuzano, a campaign leader in this respect, wrote in 1992, "There has been no feminist criticism in Cuba: we are just starting" (Campuzano, 1992: 128). The Cuban revolutionary narrative, she wrote in 1996, was "almost entirely filled with guns and cannons, as in the times of Homer or El Cid it had been populated with lances, arrows, cudgels, and broadswords" (1997a: 52-53), and the role of Cuban women had therefore been virtually erased.[11] In 1990, in collaboration with the Colegio de México, a conference on women writers (the first to be held in Cuba on this subject) was organized by the Casa de las Américas (the selected proceedings were published in *Casa de las Américas* ["Mujeres," 1991]). The following year (1991) the first conference on Cuban women writers was held in Mexico. In 1994 the Programa de Estudios de la Mujer, headed by Campuzano herself, was established by the Casa de las Américas and has since published two substantial volumes on the work of Latin American women writers from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century (Campuzano, 1997b); the twentieth-century volume is in preparation.

Women's writing, which gathered momentum in the early 1990s only to be cut short by the economic crisis, is once again flourishing.

These fundamental shifts, taking place against a background of shortages and rationing, have not been acknowledged and permitted without contention. The debates have been played out in the performance arts (film, theater), in the fine arts, and, to a lesser extent, in literature—not in books but in the glossy cultural journals that now proliferate.

One such polemic was addressed by the journalist Manuel Henríquez Lagarde (1997) in his article "Postficción; una polémica sobre identidad," in which he defends Abel Prieto's *Cultura, cubanidad y cubanía* from Antonio Vera Leon's criticism that this was yet another product of the *línea dura* in Cuba. Prieto is president of the Cuban Writers' and Artists' Union, and Vera León (now at the State University of New York) is coeditor of the U.S. journal *Apuntes postmodernos/Postmodern Notes*. Vera León had explained earlier that he was not so much interested in assimilating the work of diasporic Cuban authors Cristina García and Oscar Hijuelos under the rubric "Cuban literature" (a notion debated outside Cuba but generally not on the island itself) as in suggesting the possibility of a new type of postmodern Cuban "sujeto divertido" (different/diverted/entertained subject): "oscillating, active in various ethnicities . . . that moves in a cultural dance in which biculturalism is a 'means of life') and a new concept of Cuba itself: the island with fraying borders, the *isla deshilachada*" (quoted in Henríquez Lagarde, 1997: 26). Vera León attacks Prieto for continuing to deploy the binary "Cubanía"/ "plattismo" (i.e., U.S. interference in Cuba). Henríquez Lagarde ripostes, "For this essayist . . . the confrontation between Cuba and the U.S.A. is a marginal occurrence, comparable to a rock artist's declaration in the *Village Voice*" (1997: 27). He reminds Vera León of the bombs placed in Havana and the fact that Hijuelos's Pulitzer prize is awarded to U.S. nationals only. Ubiquitous Cuban identities, denationalization, deterritorialization,[12] fluid borders, transnational hybridity, and the postmodern *projecto babélico* (Henríquez Lagarde, 1997: 27) are viewed as a threat to national security.

This was exemplified in the reception of the 1995 play *Los equívocos morales* by Reinaldo Montero. The staging of this play at the Camagüey Theater Festival provoked a five-month polemic (October-February 1996) in the popular press and on the radio. Possibly unknown to the Cubans (except Montero), that very spring the play had been favorably reviewed by Judith Rudakoff in the New York *Drama Review* as a good example of Cuban "R/evolutionary theater." She argued (1996: 77) that the play put into practice a

> complex communication code: an evocative and symbol-laden physical vocabulary indicating or implying what spoken word or text dare not express for fear of repercussions. Image after image, drawn from daily experience and juxtaposed against plots of archetypal import, penetrate the glaze of homogeneity that is often fostered by the form of "social democracy" enforced in Cuba.

Set in 1898, the play is a historical allegory (a besieged island resisting Spanish and American appropriation at all costs) performed by the stock figures of nineteenth-century *bufo* or clown theater using a rich spectrum of styles and images. The audience, writes Rudakoff, is bombarded with information: "the implication is that whoever can best manipulate information will, ultimately, have the power to win any battle or gain control over any people" (1996: 87). The theater critic Jorge Rivas Rodríguez (1997 [1996]) of the popular Cuban Trade Union newspaper *Trabajadores* attacked the play's "despotic, denigrating, and unjustified" treatment of the Cuban flag (stamped on by one of the characters) and its aggressive sarcasm and lack of imagination. Two weeks later another journalist from *Trabajadores* (Recio, 1997), quoting his colleague, launched a ferociously emotional attack on the radio (Radio Rebelde, October 10, 1996), accusing the play (and intellectuals) of mocking the Cuban people (*trabajadores y campesinos*). The play, he insinuated, was anticonstitutional; Cuba needed good theater criticism, by which he meant regulation. A reply by Rafael González, director of Teatro Escambray, appeared in *Trabajadores* the next day, pointing out that the play had been on tour for a year, appearing in Havana's International Theater Festival and in Canada, without controversy and that Recio had not even seen it. Two better-known theater critics, Pedro de la Hoz and Oscar Valiño, came to Teatro Escambray's defense on Radio Rebelde on November 7, insisting—significantly— that art and politics should remain each in its own space. Pedro de la Hoz (1997) reiterated this point in an article in *Granma* indicating the need for informed debate that soundly rejected any inference of censorship. Rivas and Recio, backpedaling to a degree, published their written replies in *Trabajadores* (November 25, 1996) and *La Gaceta de Cuba* (January-February 1997), respectively. The distinguished art and theater critic Graziella Pogolotti joined in, and, finally, a hard-hitting piece by Abel Prieto (1997), "'La cigarra y la hormiga': Un remake al final del milenio"—the last word—appeared in this special issue of *La Gaceta de Cuba*.

In what must be one of the most incisive statements on the postmodern debate in Cuba, Prieto picks up on the topical analogy between the story of the useless artist/cricket and productive worker/ant. His main argument is

that the only possible "revolutionary" response in contemporary culture is a "politics that is open, plural, antidogmatic, an enemy of all sectarianisms" (1997: 54). Previous and current prejudices, he claims, are the result of ignorance, machismo, and the rejection of "any 'effeminate' spiritual refinement" (1997: 54). These prejudices are voiced by ignorant thugs,

> As if a lack of culture made them "harder," more virile, more revolutionary. Would they be prepared, these "hard men," to read Martí . . . ? Or are they only fit for watching films about Rambo and other "hard men" manufactured in series by the Hollywood industry? Would they be capable of reading [Fernando Ortiz's] *Cuban Counterpoint*. . . . Or do they only accept the primitive "adult" language of Yankee film subtitles?

Cuban culture must be allowed to develop freely, Prieto argues, because it is the only available antidote to *Forrest Gump* and Disneyland and the values these subsume (1997: 55):

> It isn't possible to exercise antimperialism during the daytime and give in to the subcultural drug of the Empire at night. . . . The fact is that the most serious "ideological problem" we have to face in relation to culture is (precisely) a lack of culture.

It should not be forgotten whom Prieto is implicitly addressing here: Cuban workers, members of the trade union. What he defends at all costs is culture, even postmodernism, as long as it is "made in Cuba." Cuba needs to encourage a solid cultural defense against *yanquización*; for Prieto the cognitive and critical functions of art are a social necessity.

CONCLUSION

I suggest that there are two ways in which we might think about postmodernism in Cuba. The first is the more obviously "enchanting for its rigour," to paraphrase Borges (1964 [1944]: 18). In this account postmodernity/postmodernism is identified with the post-Soviet delegitimation of the Marxist grand narrative of emancipation. The failure of modernity in Cuba, the weakening of authority, and the collapse of the center have allowed space for the articulation of other discourses and identities. These multiple "signs," most

apparent since 1992, may be seen as threatening or stimulating (Lechner, 1993: 129) if controlled.

A second, "more rabbinical explanation" (Borges, 1964 [1944]: 77) is this: the "soup of signs" on which Cuba is surviving today is a replay of a half-forgotten endogenous postmodernity. In Cuba there is less of a market economy now than there was in the 1950s; Cubans are still small-scale consumers; information technology is still not advanced; channels of communication (the press and TV/radio channels) do not proliferate. Despite the crisis of Marxism, however, one "supreme fiction" seems to be holding strong, increasingly so as the fictions of late capitalism lose their attraction. This is Cuban national identity/difference.

This more complex version of Cuban cultural history may read as follows: as with other developed or semideveloped capitalist countries, modernism appeared in Cuba in the first decades of the century as a reaction to realism and liberal management. In Cuba the force of the avant-garde was strong: in the nostalgia and sublimation of Lezama Lima, the inventive interdisciplinary wordplay of Ortiz, and the Marxist variant of Guillén. The significance of the 1959 Revolution in terms of modernity/postmodernity was that the Cuban collectivity opted to switch from the narrative of late capitalism to a Marxist/nationalist alternative. Once institutionalized, having lost its critical edge, this became yet another grand narrative that, of late, is developing in another direction. Toward postmodernity? Perhaps; but the island has been there before.

NOTES

1. For Anthony Giddens (1990: 45-46), postmodernity means that "the trajectory of social development is taking us away from the institutions of modernity towards a new and distinct type of social order." Postmodernism refers to "the styles or movements" within the arts, "aspects of aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity." I understand postmodernism as disenchantment with narratives of progress in the ideological and cultural spheres.

2. The point is that Marxism and the avant-garde both provide critiques of modernity but are still modern in that they separate the experts from the public and insist on progress (see Follari, 1990).

3. For Williams (1995), Lezama Lima's *Paradiso* (1989 [1966]) was a precursor of postmodern fiction. A stronger case could be made for a novel written by a woman who clearly despaired of all master narratives: *Jardín* (1992 [1951]), by Dulce María Loynaz.

4. See the comments of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group: "The Cuban Revolution represents a partial revival of the impulse towards a surfacing of the subaltern. The concept of the people as the 'working masses' became the new center of representation. But the subject of

history was never in question, and so neither was the adequacy of its representation by the revolutionary sects" (1993: 113).

5. See Carpentier (1997) and the scene of the burning of Mackandal in his 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo* (1986: 39-42).

6. For Zavala the *point de capiton* (a concept taken from Derrida), the metasignifier which gives meaning to all others in the Caribbean area, is the United States.

7. See Frederic Jameson (1986). Several Spanish publications are cited by Cubans, such as Picó (1988), which includes key texts by leading theorists of postmodernism.

8. Articles of note in the 1994 volume include Helga Finter, "La cámara-ojo del teatro postmoderno"; Erika Fischer-Lichte, "El postmoderno:¿continuación o fin del moderno? La literatura entre la crisis cultural y el cambio cultural," both translated from German; Stefan Morawski, "Sobre la filosofía del arte y la crisis del racionalismo," translated from Polish; Pierre Bourdieu, "Por un corporatismo de lo universal"; Renato Barilli, "Polivalencia y ambigüedad del postmoderno"; Hal Foster, "El postmodernismo en paraje" and Hans Sanders, "El postmoderno: La cotidianidad como utopía." Other authors include P. Burger, M. Bahktin, J. Clifford, A. Huyssen, and Y. Lotman.

9. According to the authors, it is also a reply to Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez (1989). But Sánchez Vázquez presents postmodernism in an almost entirely negative light, associating it implicitly with the nihilistic view of life that condemns humanity to "inaction, impotence, or passivity" (1989: 144).

10. I thank Steve Wilkinson, currently writing a doctoral thesis on Padura Fuentes, for pointing out this passage to me.

11. Campuzano (1997a) encouraged the reinscription of women in the nation's story by studying the *testimonios* written by women participating in the literacy campaign.

12. The Latin American Subaltern Studies Group (1993: 118) similarly proposes the abolition of the (white, middle-class, masculinist) concept of the nation.

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