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Cuban-Exile Identity and Novels for the Young

By Alexandra McPherson

Cubans comprise a diverse group, their society spanning across variations in race, class, gender, and cultural experience. However, they are often essentialized by their political and ideological affiliation with socialism and are often placed in binary opposition with the United States and capitalism. In children's literature, Cuban diversity and conflicting ideologies, as well as U.S./Cuban interconnections, are highly transparent. Elias Miguel Muñoz's Brand New Memory (1998) and Hilda Perera's Kiki: A Cuban Boy's Adventures in America (1992)—both by Cuban exiles in the U.S.—display this transparency. Muñoz's and Perera's novels present, respectively a middle road political position and a one-dimensional, anti-socialist position.

The Formation of Cuban-Exile Identity

Of particular importance to contemporary dialogues about island Cubans and exiled Cubans is the question of race and gender inequality. The controversy centers on whether or not racism and sexism have been largely eliminated or remain pervasive throughout the various social, political, cultural, and economic spheres. Questions concerning racism (and more recently, gender equity) remain a continuous source of friction and debate. And predictably, novels for the young include examples of racist thought, as well as examples of upward mobility for all racial groups.

Castro’s “Cuban experiment,” which began in 1959, created an upsurge of interest in race and gender issues. At first people tended to view the new revolutionary government in celebratory rather than critical terms. This positive response stemmed from the transformation of an inequitable capitalist system into a socialist economy that promoted a more egalitarian distribution of goods and services. In relation to children and to women, this transformation brought striking results. Prior to the 1959 revolution, 40% of Cuban children did not go to school and approximately 985,000 people were illiterate; by December of 1961, 700,000 Cubans (half of whom were children) had learned to read and write, and by 1977, 80% of Cuban women were literate (Davies 116-17). By the year 2000 Cuba had the highest literacy rate in the world: 95.7%. According to Stuart Hamilton, Cuba's free schooling was the result of a high educational budget over a forty year period (a budget that also produced "the highest index of teachers per capita in the world") (4).

In relation to land usage, by the spring of 1961 over a third of the farmland was controlled by the state, and by that date approximately 100,000 members of the bourgeoisie had left Cuba (Thomas 1354). This group increased the Cuban exile community, especially in Florida, and from that point a significant Cuban American lobby gradually increased its influence in American foreign policy. As early as 1960, the U.S. had begun putting in place its economic embargo against Cuba, and the aborted Bay of Pigs invasion occurred in 1961. When the Elián Gonzalez affair occurred in 2000-2001 (an emigrating six-year-old Cuban had been rescued from a floating inner tube after losing his mother at sea), the Cuban exile community was highly engaged politically. A Miami Herald poll found that 91% of Cuban Americans in South Florida believed Elián should be forced to remain in the United States (LeoGrande 39).

Prior to the 1959 overthrow of the dictator (Batista), Cuba was highly nationalistic, but still divided by class, race, and gender prejudices. In this climate, dialogue pertaining to widespread disfranchisement was left to a small group of socially conscious Cubans of varying racial and political persuasions. This group (not part of the elite cadre that allocated national resources) used a variety of artistic and literary genres to disseminate its concerns. Following the revolution, Cuba became a more openly multi-ethnic, multi-racial society, but it was not without contradictions. The historical evolution of Cuba (including its indigenous, Spanish and African ethnic blend) can be likened to a search for identity and the capacity to maintain it as essentially expressive of Cubanness. In the post-1959 period, emphasis was placed upon Cuban-style socialism and the equating of this form...
of socialism with a nationalism that promotes cohesiveness and humanitarian change. But contradictions within the system remained.

The gap between ideology and policy, for example, was often submerged beneath the cloak of Cuban nationalism. The quintessential Cuba was described as an embodiment of spirituality, authenticity, and moral uprightness—all this in contrast to American materialism. The quintessential Cuba was often submerged beneath the cloak of Cuban nationalism, all this in contrast to American materialism. The quintessential Cuba was described as an embodiment of spirituality, authenticity, and moral uprightness—all this in contrast to American materialism.

For example, African roots were officially celebrated on the one hand, but a lingering racialized consciousness was also in evidence. AfroCubans have always been extremely active in the art world, but were largely excluded in the cultural decision-making process. Much of the artistic bourgeoisie continued to use African retentions, but still promoted European over African culture. Additionally, Cuban feminists tended to separate island Cubans and exiled Cubans. And AfroCubans have always been extremely active in the art world, but were largely excluded in the cultural decision-making process. Much of the artistic bourgeoisie continued to use African retentions, but still promoted European over African culture.

Unfortunately, for Cuban Americans.

The Middle Course: Muñoz’s Brand New Memory

To some degree, children’s literature has been retooled from the overt racist language of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contemporary narratives, racism is more subtle, and it is precisely because of this subtlety that we need to be attentive to the biases embedded in literature for the young. Social-political issues can be either mediated or confused. Children are offered ideas about their place in the world, and national identities take shape. But given the many waves of Cuban exiles, it is exceedingly difficult to define the meaning of Cubanness for Cuban Americans.

Brand New Memory offers a microcosm of the struggle faced by Cubans as they forge an identity. The novel reveals how identity markers are passed on to succeeding generations. Characters share family and cultural ties, yet each character in the novel negotiates and defines “life on the hyphen” differently. For Gina, a Cuban American, a fragmented sense of family history creates a sense of dissonance in the identity process. Gina hears cynicism, bitterness, and nostalgia when Cuba and the family left behind are discussed. Her understanding of Cuba and Cuban history is as minimal as it is fragmented; nevertheless, she absorbs elements of the anti-Castro rhetoric. Gina does not accept at face value, however, her parents’ stories of what life was like in Cuba:

Daddy [Benito] has never forced her, like Maman, to act or think in a certain way .... The only ideas Benito has tried to teach her have to do with communism. And that makes sense, it figures, since it was because of communism that he left his homeland.

He says that violence in countries with Marxist regimes is much worse than here, because it’s both psychological and physical. “They try to poison your mind, pollute your head, brainwash you. And when all those mental tortures don’t work, they throw you in jail. And if darkness and isolation can’t get the job done, they shoot you!”

Sounds horrible, but it’s the truth, he claims.... Her Dad has the inside scoop on the subject. Or is he, too, inclined to blow things out of proportion like Maman? (15-16)

Gina has no personal framework to support her parents’ version of events. But even though she does not have first-hand experience with the Revolution, she consciously recognizes, albeit reluctantly, the need to hear and accept the stories of relatives. The narrator points out a possible history as shown in this passage:

The truth that looms over their home is that Gina’s parents went through hell in Cuba. But what does that mean? The girl is supposed to accept their alleged suffering and yet hasn’t seen any of it, not really. By the time she was born fourteen years ago her father had a flower shop and would soon be buying a Pinos Verdes mansion. Life was good and better, much better than it ever was on the island. (3)

Ultimately, Gina pieces together the fragmented ideologies and stories to create her own history, while at the same time she searches for her own identity as a Cuban American.
Gina’s father exemplifies the entrepreneurial capital that left Cuba, but some of his admonitions only confuse the issue further:

One must always go forward in life. That’s Daddy’s motto. Big empty words for a Pinos Verdes adolescent: *Salir adelante.* “It hurts to remember,” claims her mother, and Gina doesn’t get that, either. She has a few memories of her own but none is horribly painful. What is it like to hurt because of something you remember? How does one “go forward in life”? (3)

Gina does have a desire to “move forward,” but for different reasons than her father. At her core Gina realizes that she will need more than the physically mature body and material possessions often highlighted in North American culture. She will need to establish a connection to her Cuban heritage. Gina wants to fill in the gaps:

Some fading photographs hold her only clues. Telling depictions of early exile, circa 1966.... Uneasy smiles, awkward poses, plastic-covered furniture and barren walls. (3)

But her parents don’t take photos anymore.... Now they own a video camera, which is solely Gina’s responsibility. (4)

As the camerawoman she has the opportunity to splice, edit, and discover the many fragments that make up the Cuban-exile identity. And one significant strand in Gina’s identity process is her interest in the African components. Her parents treat that strand in purely elitist and racist terms. When Gina learns that Estela (her Cuban grandmother) is coming for a long summer visit, her mother emphasizes that Estela is “…not like us” and goes beyond this to indicate that “Benito’s mother is a Santera” (a spiritist) (72, 74). Throughout the novel, Gina hears only pejorative comments from her mother with regard to her grandmother. For Elisa, (Gina’s mother), Estela’s presence is a reminder of a painful past, frustrated goals—the antithesis of what she has sought to achieve in the United States. Because of this perceived threat, Elisa aims to minimize her mother-in-law’s potential influence on her family by associating her with those things that she feels are inferior culturally, spiritually, and politically. These “inferior” elements are her mother-in-law’s poverty, her daily nonsense of her own but none is horribly painful. What is it like to hurt because of something you remember? How does one “go forward in life”? (3)

Gina might have asked similar questions even had she known the trials that her father faced when seeking her acceptance into a school that “has earned an excellent reputation for its good teachers, its strict dress code, and its religious atmosphere” (19). Apparently, the staff at All Saints High School finds even “white” Cuban children with excellent marks not quite acceptable; “[t]he admissions officers required [Benito] to submit proof of his legal status and his income, and to show evidence of his religious fervor” (19).

Adding to such complexities at school, Gina’s father begins laying ground rules with regard to Gina’s choice of suitors. She is to date “only educated, clean-cut, well dressed Caucasian boys” (77). Clearly lumping together all young men who are not well-to-do Caucasians, Benito makes additional specifications: “there will be no Vatos, Blacks, Asians, Arabs, Punks, Marielitos, Grungies, Neohippies and no Skinheads” (77). Gina follows these racist proscriptions in her dating life, but her dreams take her to another country, freeing her to safely explore a forbidden AfroCuban heritage. She encounters a dark Cuban spirit whom she calls Señor Babalao. Perhaps Señor McCuban’s purpose is to “awaken” Gina to possibilities beyond a homogenous, Anglo-filtered world. Gina enlists first the aid of an Iyalocha (Afro-Caribbean santera) to exorcise the spirit of McCuban and then the aid of a Babalao (a male spiritist). At this point, Gina recognizes the fantasy as a type of “spiritual crisis” (97). Señor Babalao is “primitive-looking, sexy; his face is covered with blotches of white paint” (97). Ironically, it is this high priest of santeria—a vision representing one layer of Cuba’s mestizo/a culture—who is supposed to eliminate Gina’s desire for her dark, Cuban visitor. But the Babalao informs her that the spirit exists because “she gives him the power” to exist; Señor McCuban merely awaits her acknowledgment of her love for him (98).
Gina, like many of the younger generation, is bombarded with conflicting ideologies relating to the Cuban collective experience as political refugees. Her mother’s response to refugee status is to take the “castaway” approach. She has fabricated a past life and recreated herself, and her family, as French, though she has never been to France.

Elisa Rochart de Domingo.... A Francophile mother who is descended from monarchs (or so she says), and who would ask her daughter, one day, to call her “Maman.” She would coach the girl, help her acquire the proper nasality, pronounce the word gracefully, Maman, just like a true Parisian. (3)

They were the Rocharts: French father, Spanish mother, one daughter born in Camaguey. Monsieur Rochart was...[the] owner of vast sugarcane fields and a stately hacienda (33).

Elise goes so far as to try to recreate her husband’s past, rather than accepting the fact that he comes from working-class people. In her recreated world, Benito comes from hacienda owners who are descended from pure-blooded Spaniards. In reality he was only a salesman on the island (44) and no matter how hard he worked, the fact that he was not of the ruling elite caused Gina’s mother to despise her husband.

God, how she hates his business stench, his newspaper ads, his discounts for Cuban patriarchs and matrons, his gun, and his bourgeois mentality. (46)

In essence, Elise’s desire is to separate herself and her family from the communist regime that took away her family, status, and wealth.8

Her wish to put distance between Benito and his mother was fulfilled, thanks to Castro and his low-class guerrillas. The Domingos would emigrate to the far North, leaving the old hag behind.... And what a stroke of luck when Estela announced that she was staying, that she would never abandon her country. The natural decision for an illiterate farmwoman like her. Of course she would take advantage of the so-called People’s Revolution, wallow in her own dirt, along with all the other canaille. Of course she’d become a vile communist! (71)

Elisa’s anti-Castro rhetoric stems from dispossession. By eliminating the elites’ monopolies over resources such as land, education, and the means of production, Castro worked to produce social change from the top down. And his government garnered the support of masses of people whose desires to go forward (salir adelante) in life had been frustrated by lack of opportunities.

In contrast to Elisa, Gina’s Cuban grandmother transmits Cuban cultural ideology and connects with differing strands of socialism. In her first letter to her granddaughter, she speaks of the opportunities that the Revolution afforded all people, regardless of their race, sex, or economic standing.

Soon after the Revolution, there were many young teachers who came from Havana and Camagüey to teach us country folks to read and write. Thanks to those kind people, many of us learned how to sign our names, instead of having to make an X like we had always done. And reading was like a miracle for me. All my life I had wanted to read the poetry of José Martí, and now I was able to do it at last. (63)

At first Estela did not learn to write, but a granddaughter in America changed all that.

But as much as I loved reading Marti’s poetry, writing was difficult for me, and I thought it was something I didn’t need. So I gave it up. Then you were born....

So I said to myself, Estela, you are going to go to school so you can use beautiful words when you write to your granddaughter some day. And I got so excited that I ended up studying at the Secundaria, taking classes for adults, and I received my diploma. Can you believe that? An old lady like me going to school like a child! (63)

While learning from her grandmother, Gina (and the reader) discovers that her Cuban cousins are experiencing a similar search for Cuban identity.

Your cousins are curious about you, mi niña.... They are good kids. I argue with them sometimes, above all with Bladimir, because he wants expensive clothes and modern machines.... Young people always want material things. But Bladi doesn’t know how hard it was for us before. He has no idea.

Look at your Papá, for example. It’s a miracle he got to learn a good profession at all. (65)
The Cuban youth, as personified in Bladimir, seek to understand their common heritage.

Bladimir says he’s going to show the problems of our country in his movies. That way we can make changes and improve our lives.... I only hope he doesn’t suffer too much when he realizes that some of our problems have no solutions. (66)

Bladimir’s approach to his identity-formation process, with regard to what he knows of Cuban history, is more moderate than Gina’s. He believes that by being a filmmaker and by documenting the truth (by showing the revolution’s unfulfilled promises), Cubans choosing to remain in their homeland will have access to new opportunities and solutions.

In the end, Gina’s father emerges with a more flexible attitude, allowing Gina to accompany her now deceased grandmother’s ashes to Cuba. She will have the benefit of direct contact with her Cuban peers and move beyond mere rumors and dreams in assessing Cuban reality.

*Brand New Memory* provides a literary representation of the tensions and rifts that occur when a family is divided geographically and ideologically. The book shows how people become disillusioned with aspects of the ideology they live under (finding themselves, for example, caught between capitalism and communism), yet they are able to move no closer to their loved ones. While some novels, like *Kiki*, promote binary thinking about Cuba and the U.S., Muñoz’s novel positions readers so they have no choice but to consider the relationships between the characters from a more multi-dimensional perspective.

**Kiki and a Demonized Castro**

Many Cubans in exile would find Muñoz’s more even-handed Cuban perspective unthinkable. They see nothing positive in Castro’s regime and view Castro himself as a satanic figure. In novels written by these aggrieved expatriates, Castro becomes a virtual monster. He deprives children of candy and birthday presents. He has their teachers shot. He even takes away the colors from the Cuban environment and leaves only a gray and dreary world. In Hilda Perera’s *Kiki: A Cuban Boy’s Adventures in America*, the novelist presents such malevolence in these terms:

There was no candy in Cuba anymore, so I took all I could [from the flight attendant]. (5)

Everybody seemed to be dressed in bright colors.... So different from Cuba! (9)

More important was the apparent loss of life and personal safety. Perera presents these threatening scenarios:

Being a “worm” in Cuba... means you are against the revolution. People were sent to the firing squad just for being “worms.” (10)

He had cried “Long live Christ The King!”... before the firing Squad. Then they shot him [a priest who was Kiki’s teacher]. (8)

Perera used the actual Catholic church-sponsored emigration of children from Cuba between January, 1961, and October, 1962, as the backdrop for *Kiki*. In this exodus (dubbed by the Miami press corps as “Operation Pedro Pan”), 14,000 children were transported to Florida and supplied with surrogate families while their parents remained behind on the island. In an attempt to explain these events, the novelist goes to great lengths to portray the Castro regime as authoritarian and having no respect for the freedoms or dignity of the people it represents. Kiki describes the police in these terms: “I had stopped believing in cops the day one of them, in a long beard and olive-colored uniform, took Papa away at gunpoint. We’d spent days without seeing him, or knowing where he was” (7). Unlike *Brand New Memory*, *Kiki* does not provide a counterbalance. Even potentially positive reforms by the Cuban government are non-existent.

Like many upper-class Cubans, Kiki’s parents are alarmed by the measures the government is taking to consolidate power. When the regime begins to nationalize the lands and corporations owned by wealthy Cubans and foreign investors, Kiki’s parents make arrangements for him to join Operation Pedro Pan. They decide that growing up in socialist Cuba will be more detrimental to their children than being separated from family. To make their impending separation less scary, Kiki’s mother provides her son with a mental picture of the abundant opportunities in the United States: good schools, baseball fields, tennis courts, swimming pools, and horses. In contrast, before Kiki and his cousins enter the plane, they are called worms and forced to take off their clothing at gunpoint. The small objects that will serve as reminders of family are confiscated: “When I felt my pockets I found they [the Customs officials] had taken the watch Papa gave me in advance for my ninth birthday (14).”

The novelist makes the point repeatedly that police behavior in Cuba has no boundaries. However, Perera undermines her anti-Castro stance with her own anti-AfroCuban position. Tata (the family’s Black servant) is the proverbial mammy stereotype who dotes on her employer’s child and says he is “really her child” (6). Kiki emphasizes the closeness of his relationship with Tata...
when he describes the impact that his departure has on her: “Tata loved me a lot. She had taken care of me since I was born.... When we’d left for the airport, she had held her: “Tata loved me a lot. She had taken care of me since I

This scene does not suggest an egalitarian Black/White relationship, but rather the complete self-immolation that the mammy figure has historically represented. Additionally, Tata is forever spooked, trying to ward off “the evil eye,” because the evil eye caused one of her nieces to shrink “till she looked like a monkey” (6-7). When Kiki visits the “Little Havana” section of Miami, he sees voodoo shops where “weird” things are sold for fending off bad luck. We learn that “[E]xcept for Tata, no one in my family believed in voodoo” (86).

When Kiki balks at writing down “Cuban” as his race (he says to his teacher in Florida, “I am a white Cuban”), his insistence on whiteness may be understandable, given the way a Black Cuban is characterized by Perera. Kiki is reluctant to rejoin his own family after they arrive in Florida, since his life in a wealthy physician’s home makes him discard anything pointing to his Cuban roots (84). The “dumb” Cuban housekeeper in his surrogate parent’s mansion is an offense to him. The boat he receives as a present, and the boat races he will enter at the country club—this is the good American life that Kiki associates with his “whiteness.” Possibly, it is a reminder of the life he and his family had before Castro.

Perera’s anti-communist fervor is quite predictable, if one considers the record of Cuban exile politics. In Damián J. Fernández’s Cuba and the Politics of Passion, we hear the voice of a Cuban American leader, U.S. Congressional Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart: “We must do everything possible to accelerate the collapse of the dictatorship. This is the passion that drives me” (143). Fernández comments that this kind of absolute moral imperative leads to a “political culture in which the ends justify the means”;

The end—the collapse of the Castro regime and his demise—warrants all necessary means—violence, embargo, isolation, condemnation, and even censorship and physical attacks against those outside Cuba who do not toe the same line. No compromise is possible. (143)

In the novel about “Kiki,” the “no compromise” rule is evident on every page. Cuba has become part of the Soviet sphere, and Perera shows how Kiki’s brother acquires shoes by trading a bottle of liquor for a Russian’s shoes (6). Kiki’s thirteen-year-old cousin, Maria, serves as a means for introducing the Soviet influence in Angola. Maria’s boyfriend has died when the Cuban revolutionary army stationed him in Angola (which was in the midst of its own revolutionary struggle) (11).

In relation to religion, Perera claims that parochial schools have been turned into jails, and that all priests are either incarcerated in those jails or have left the country (8). Some priests, as noted above, have been shot. Likewise, technicians are not allowed to leave the country, and attempts to escape by boat are much too dangerous: “Any boat caught slipping out, it’s gunfire first and questions later, if you are still alive” (33).

When Kiki meets a Native American with a raccoon pet named Paco, the novelist uses the episode for the following commentary on freedom versus Cuban oppression. Kiki remarks about the way Paco lives in a cage: “there were lots of people in the world who weren’t free, like the Cubans who lived in Cuba, but they had no choice. At least, in Paco’s case, the cage door was open. In the Cubans’ case, it wasn’t” (61). Turning to other nations in the world, Perera makes an allusion to Poland, thereby reinforcing an anti-communism theme. In Miami, Kiki’s grandfather’s neighbor tells of her escape from Poland, and her early prediction about Cuba: “We knew [Cuba] would end up in communism, as in Poland” (38).

The novel is replete with examples of how the new government’s regular economy (socialism) is not functioning well enough to provide even the most common items. Kiki’s family often resorts to the black market where trade and bartering, rather than currency, are used to procure goods and services. In the final analysis, Perera seems to be contriving a virtual catalogue of economic/political conditions—those that are criminal at worst and inconvenient at best. There is no hint of the economic realities of the post-Batista era, especially the way Cuba will come under a trade embargo by the U.S. beginning in 1960, and made dependent upon Soviet aid to the tune of $3-$4 billion per year (LeoGrande 35, 37). Despite a felicitous, child-appropriate literary style, this novelist makes anti-Castro indoctrination the primary feature of her author-to-child communications.

The “Gatekeepers”: Publishers, Reviewers, Educators

In such an atmosphere of overheated political controversy, what role will the allegedly neutral “gatekeepers” play in selecting literature about Cubans? Children, in particular, are a captive audience—readers dependent upon what public and school librarians select for them. Hans-Heino Ewers succinctly states:

The “unofficial addressee” [in a children’s book] is the adult mediator, who plays a constitutive role in the process of communication of children’s literature. For without his or her mediating achievement, communication could not take place. The child is not yet able to act independently in the literary marketplace.
child is dependent on others to recognize its literary needs and to select from available offerings accordingly. We all know that adult mediators have used their indispensable role in order to exercise control and to patronize. (81)

Reviewers of children’s books are among the chief mediators, and, in the handling of Kiki, they are of one mind. In the American Library Association’s Booklist, reviewer Hazel Rochman described Kiki as “funny and poignant” (738). She commends Perera for offering “no heavy-handed comment on Kiki’s contempt for Cuban ways,” that is, his initial desire to remain with an Anglo family after his parents eventually reach the U.S. But Rochman seems oblivious to the heavy-handedness in Perera’s portrait of a socialist government. Rochman sees in Kiki’s life an experience with which many immigrants can directly associate, but it must also be said that the Cold War rhetoric connects the book with “Iron Curtain” stories. Children’s literature is replete with novels depicting communism as the arch villain. Political ideology is a more central theme than the traumas of a migrant life.

Diane S. Martin of the School Library Journal similarly notes that “the story could be that of any immigrant child today” (94). She appreciates Perera’s “candor, humor, and insight” (94), and even suggests this novel as a classroom read-aloud choice. In listing this novel as one of the best publications dealing with “Growing Up in the South,” the American Library Association mentions that Kiki is “a young person caught between two cultures” (1865), but that assessment ignores the drumbeating that can hardly be said to suggest a viable duality.

These examples reveal the continuity of American and Cuban anti-communism. The reviewers saw nothing worth reporting about the political diatribes in Kiki, although children’s book reviewers are often quick to condemn overt propaganda. The issue, really, is not about whether a social-political dimension will be present, but rather how it will be treated. “The social landscape,” according to Joel Taxel, will always be a feature in fiction, but it needs to be recognized as such and critiqued alongside the more abstract elements in the creative process (99). In studying novels about American wars, for example, Taxel finds that stories about the Revolutionary War reflect attitudes not about the war as much as about an author’s attitudes about contemporaneous conflicts: e.g., World War II and the Vietnam War. He concludes:

My point is that it is impossible to understand the evolution and development of children’s literature without situating the books of a given era in the sociocultural and political milieu of that period. Pressures and forces, both direct and indirect, subtle and not so subtle, influence the writing, publication, and review of books and are a part of the social landscape that includes the culture of publishing. (99)

Taxel is making a vital point by connecting “the culture of publishing,” the “evolution of children’s literature,” and the “political milieu.” Perera’s book found common ground—namely, an anti-Castro standpoint—in all these spheres.

A different combination of forces had a bearing upon Muñoz’s Brand New Memory and its accessibility. This coming-of-age novel was published by Arte Público (a Latino/a-centered company) in its adult novel category, not among the books for children called “Piñata Books.” In the 2001 catalogue, the publisher compares Brand New Memory with another example of cross-writing: J.D. Salinger’s famous Catcher in the Rye (37). Salinger’s work is listed in Children’s Literature: a Guide to the Criticism (Hendrickson 234) because in time it evolved into a young adult classic. But by being marketed and reviewed as an adult book, Muñoz’s novel will probably be limited in the degree to which it finds a young audience. The Library Journal reviewer, Judith Anne Akalaitis, states that the book is “recommended for all libraries” (95), but given the specific way the book is categorized, and given the fact that Arte Público is a small, specialized press housed at the University of Houston, it is unlikely that young adult librarians will learn of the book’s existence. In short, institutional/commercial barriers can prevent Muñoz’s more balanced perspective from being widely disseminated. Young people are essentially denied access to a divergent sociopolitical perspective.

Conclusion

...Now, years later, my father dead, my mother gets the mail, the catalogues, and she sends it all up to me in Tallahassee, and she’s circled the word “free” and asks me what the deal is.

Most Sundays I try to convince her once and for all that there are no deals, that nothing is free, then there’s silence over the line and I can hear her thinking otherwise.

She is a woman who wants to cling to something as simple as a two-for-one deal, the extra, the much more, the free: these simple things she knows have kept us going all these exiled years.

—Virgil Suárez (43)
These lines from *In the Republic of Longing* show how compensation for a dispossessed life is an underlying hope of exiled Cubans. A "simple" concept—redress of Castro-made grievances—is a driving passion, yet Cuba is never simple, and the complexities of the last dozen years only underscore that point. The 1990's came to be known as the "special period." The term is synonymous with the political and economic upheavals occurring in a revolutionary Cuba minus Soviet support. During this time, Cubans on the island continued to struggle under the ever-constricting choke-hold of the United States embargo (LeoGrande 37). They also watched with some trepidation the dissolution of what had once been their life-sustaining economic sponsor: the U.S.S.R.

Suffering from the specter of economic collapse, Cubans were forced to reaffirm their loyalties and their identities. As mirrored in some children's novels, Cubans found it difficult to continue seeing themselves as in the past—in simplistic dichotomies that once seemed to make sense. But complicating the issue is a mutual stubbornness in the way both Americans and Cubans justify their policies. The U.S. sees the Caribbean as within its sphere of influence, and, indeed, the U.S. has coveted Cuba since at least the mid-nineteenth-century. The American president, James K. Polk, tried to buy Cuba from Spain for $100 million, and President Franklin Pierce offered $130 million. When the 1898 war with Spain presented the ideal opportunity for possession, a longstanding American policy goal was finally achieved. But not surprisingly, Cuban anger over their aborted independence never subsided (Winkler A18). The conflict only intensified with time. In the words of historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr.:

North Americans could not understand that while they could possess almost anything they wanted,... they could not have Cuba.... For nearly two centuries that [contest] continued, so that the North Americans' resolve to possess Cuba and the Cuban determination to resist possession became part of the national character of each and something of an obsession for both. (Perez, "Circle" 162)

As long as this contest over control continues, barriers to communication among Cuban Americans will likely remain in place. The expatriates will cling to the idea that the U.S. government will, in time, turn Cuba over to them; whereas the island Cubans will see such a development as yet another failure to achieve Cuban independence. In a word, a de facto colonial existence would reassert itself.

Cuban identity formation is entangled in this struggle, and its outlines can be traced in what Cubans create for the young, as well as what librarians select for them. The lines of argument are especially clear-cut in the novels of Perera and Muñoz where an unmistakable political culture is embedded at the core of each work.

Moreover, "gatekeeping" activities are indicators of unresolved imbalances. Books about Hispanics are rare, and the presses handling them are typically small and specialized. Resources are too meager to allow for numerous review copies, and interest in Hispanic materials in mainstream circles is practically nil, even while professionals talk about multiculturalism as an important value. Writing about the "state of the art," columnist Patty Campbell notes that Hispanics more than any other group are underrepresented in today's children's book publishing industry. She notes that there is a "yawning hole where young adult books about the Hispanic experience in America should be" (120). Hispanic young adult literature, she says, is "a subgenre waiting to happen." One indication is the way an anthologist "mined university presses and obscure journals for a range of poetry and short stories" suitable for young readers (121). After all the rummaging around, only a few cross-written items were located pertaining to the U.S.'s largest minority.

Cuban children's literature helps us map a nation's psyche, but the difficulties in this field are overwhelming. Tracing Cuban self-definition is a daunting task in itself, especially in light of the barriers to be crossed in bringing that self-definition to the reading public. And perceptions of "them against us" stubbornly persist. In the pointed language of Gina's grandmother: "It's either capitalism or communism. Russia or North. Socialism or death. Why are we given so few choices?" (Muñoz 155).

NOTES

1. Born September 29, 1954, in Ciego de Avila, Cuba, Elias Miguel Muñoz left Cuba in 1969, emigrating to the United States. Leaving the community of his adolescence, Hawthorne, California, Muñoz eventually resided in Irvine, California, where he received his M.A. in 1979 and his Ph.D. in 1984. That same year he accepted a job as an assistant professor in Latin American studies at the University of Kansas. However, he left academia to pursue fiction writing and poetry full-time. Muñoz is a highly regarded writer known for literary experimentation.

2. Hilda Perera was born on November 9, 1926, to an upper-middle class family (her father was a Supreme Court judge and her mother a homemaker). Perera attended private schools and later graduated from colleges in both Cuba and the United States. When the Castro regime came to power, Perera was supportive of the new government, even winning an award from the Ministry of Education in 1960. But, by 1962, Perera's loyalties had shifted. She states "the revolution wasn't for me. Castro ruined so many lives.... I was all for the revolution in the beginning, from 1960 through 1961" ("Celebrating"). Perera and her family left Cuba in 1964 being disillusioned with the political and ideological path that the revolutionary government had taken.

3. The term AfroCuban is synonymous with Black Cuban. Cuban is the term suggesting a greater nationalist consciousness:
“Cubanness” or “Cubanidad” that seeks to focus on common ties rather than differences. AfroCuban is employed by Cubans wishing to focus immediately on both their Cuban and African heritages. The terms are both political and controversial because the meaning changes in accordance with the politics of the person or group using them.

4. Unlike their United State counterparts, Cuban women desired gender-based improvements, but not at the expense of Cuban men. Cuban feminists felt that the American ideology of individualism contributed to the privileging of sexism over all other forms of oppression affecting women’s lives. While Western feminists tend to essentialize universal patriarchy, Cuban feminists feel that patriarchal influences vary according to context and that the pervasive effects of other kinds of discrimination (such as the effects of U.S. imperialism) must be eliminated for other oppressions to be adequately addressed. According to Catherine Davies, “Unlike U.S. feminists, however, Cuban feminists were not overtly critical of patriarchy but rather celebrated motherhood, children and family life…working alongside progressive men they had created a new form of governance, ‘state familialism’, which was to cross the watershed of the Revolution. Feminists never lost sight of wider national consciousness” (Davies 24).

5. “Life on the hyphen” refers to the term coined by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in his book Life on the Hyphen: the Cuban American Way. In this work, as well as in his autobiography Next Year in Cuba, he describes the complexities of Cuban American Life from the perspective of the 1.5 generation. The “1.5 or one-and-a-half generation” is a term (borrowed from the Cuban Sociologist Rubén Rumbaut) that describes the generation of Cubans who lived part of their childhood or adolescence in Cuba, later emigrating to the United States” (Firmat 4). According to Gustavo Pérez Firmat, this generation of Cubans (the 1.5 generation) is unlike any other, in terms of the types of negotiations they make because of their identity and culture in a U.S. environment. The one-and-a-halfers are unique in contrast to their Cuban parents (first generation) and their American born and raised children (second generation). Diverging from Rumbaut’s focus on the one-and-a-halfers’ feelings of marginalization, Firmat maintains that while straddling two worlds might not yield the most comfortable fit it is, nonetheless, a strength. Firmat highlights this generation of Cubans’ unique cultural situation, its resilience, adaptability, and the importance of its contributions in a number of arenas, particularly, the creation of Cuban American culture (Firmat 4-5). He comments that “in some ways they (the 1.5 generation) are both first and second generation[s]…[yielding] opportunities for distinctive achievement created by this fractional existence” (Firmat 5).

6. According to Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs, santería refers to: “AfroCuban religion of Yoruba origin from Nigeria, syncretised with Catholicism, also known as ocha, regal de ocha, and regla de ifá.” Iyachola is another term that can be used interchangeably with santera/o; a santero/a being a practitioner of santería (Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs 301).

7. Mestizo/a refers to Cuba’s racially mixed heritage; in this case, use of the term refers to the Latin-African (African, indigenous, and white) roots.

8. Even the Cuban cuisine and other traditions are cast out of Gina’s household: “[S]he doesn’t follow any of the native Cuban traditions, certainly not when planning the menu…. There is to be no pork roast and no black beans and no fried plantains” (57).

9. Félix Masud-Piloto touches upon the historically unprecedented situation wherein 14,000 children became political refugees resulting from the ideological clashes between those who supported the socialist ideology of the Castro regime and those who supported U.S. ideologies of capitalism and individualism. Operation Pedro Pan, also known as the Cuban Children’s Program, was borne out of the Cuban elites’ desire to prevent the Castro regime from indoctrinating their children—and from conscripting young men fourteen years and above—to fight for a government whose ideals and policies directly opposed their ideals and their lifestyles (Masud-Piloto 39-41).

Supporting Castro’s programs for a “new” Cuban society meant that Cuban elites were supporting a government that did not have a vested interest in helping them, and consequently their children, maintain their position at the top of Cuban society—socially or economically. The degree to which one opposed, or tried to sabotage, the new government’s plans directly correlated with the degree to which one’s sense of personal freedom and security were threatened. The Castro regime’s plan zeroed in on obtaining economic or social justice for all Cubans, not just the maintenance of the dominance and privilege of the few at the top. However, the children of the Cuban elite could not have emigrated in the numbers they did, had it not been in the interests of the U.S. The parents’ vision for the children was undergirded by the anti-communist underground, the U.S. Catholic church, the U.S. State Department, and from a financial standpoint, the U.S. government generally, which secured funds for the Cuban refugee programs (Masud-Piloto 39-41).

10. According to Victor Andres Triay, in Fleeting Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children’s Program, children from the most elite Cuban families faced the fears and uncertainties of life in exile, but were assured refuge in the bosom of an extended family that had established a home in the U.S. (2-3). Children from middle-class backgrounds found themselves confronting nearly the same fears and uncertainties as their upper-class counterparts (such as the “temporary” loss of their nuclear family and the daunting transition between cultures), but without the buffer-zone of a well-established, financially secure extended family. Middle-class children were secured a place in foster homes and Catholic institutions (Triay 1-11).

11. For more on cross-writing (books that span both adult and child audiences) see Sandra L. Beckett’s “Crossing the Borders: The ‘Children’s Books’ of Michael Tournier and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézico.”


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