

*Cuban-American Literature and Art:
Negotiating Identities*, Edited by Isabel
Alvarez Borland and Lynette M. F. Borsch
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Christine Lohmeier (University of Glasgow)

Cuban-American Literature and Art is a substantial anthology which brings together essays by prominent scholars in the field, the majority of them Cuban-American themselves. The book developed out of the National Endowment for the Humanities seminars which was organised at the University of Buffalo in 2006. Here, the intention emerged to capture the essence of the seminars, to “encourage a dialogue with other current research in Cuban-American art and literature” (p. 11) as the editors explain in the Introduction in which they convincingly foreground the debates and issues covered in what is to follow.

As the title suggests, the book is organised in two parts. The first encompasses seven chapters, dealing with Cuban-American literature. The second consists of five chapters, focusing on Cuban-American art. Several interconnected themes run through the collection: the central one, captured in the book’s subtitle, is the continuous process of identity negotiation. What does it mean to be Cuban-American, Cuban American (without the hyphen), Cuban or American? Alvarez Borland and Bosch define *lo cubano-americano* as ‘an ever-shifting concept of identity defined by time, place, class, race and ethnicity within an American matrix’ (p. 2). In ‘The Spell of the Hyphen,’ a title echoing his well-known book *Life on the Hyphen* (1994), Gustavo Pérez Firmat presents a variety of

interpretations as to what it means to be Cuban-American by examining the work of four Cuban-American authors, including his own. In a fascinating analysis of selected haikus by Orlando González Esteva juxtaposed by a close reading of two of his poems, Pérez Firmat demonstrates the breadth of thought and emotion the Cuban-American experience can entail. While González Esteva seems to see himself as the same person that he was in Cuba, Pérez Firmat suffers under and yet thrives through the bilingual and bicultural experiences that being born in Cuba and spending his formative years in the United States has brought him.

The significance of language, the peaceful shoulder to shoulder or conflicting co-existence of Spanish and English, is symptomatic as well as an essential part of the Cuban-American experience, especially for those who were old enough to learn Spanish on the island and came to the States as children and teenagers. Cuban-American writers who were born in the US, often prefer to write in English, as is the case for Ana Menéndez and Cristina García. Their work is recurrently examined in chapters by Isabel Alvarez Borland on 'Figures of Identity: Ana Menéndez's and Guillermo Cabrera Infante's Photographs,' by Adriana Méndez Rodenas in 'Engendering the Nation: The Mother/Daughter Plot in Cuban American Fiction' and in 'Writing in Cuban, Living as Other: Cuban American Women Writers Getting it Right' by Eliana Rivero.

Another underlying theme of this collection is memory: collective and personal, how to remember and how to make sense of the snippets of history that linger in our minds. Within this process, photographs are an 'indispensable aide mémoire' as William Luis argues when examining 'Exile, Memories, and Identities in Gustavo Pérez Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba*'. Iraida H. López creatively reads

autobiographical essays of women from the Cuban diaspora as manifestos in which – '[i]nstead of wallowing in the nostalgia for the past' – history is utilised as a 'guide for the future' (p. 69). In his thorough inspection of Roberto G. Fernández's work, Jorge Febles demonstrates how the recurring character Mirta Vergara, undergoes 'a series of arbitrary metamorphoses' (p. 77) by the hand of her creator. With these transformations, Mirta's memories of who she is and where she comes from change accordingly. What partly makes her the 'nightmare' referred to in the chapter title is that she 'has no precise personal history' and thus no memories she can refer to and identify with.

A further theme of the anthology originates in the binary of continuity/discontinuity. This is particularly prevalent in the chapters on Cuban-American visual art, which are comprehensively introduced by Lynette M.F. Bosch, who traces traditions and transformations from Cuba's visual arts of the 1920s and 1930s, to most recent developments in the transnational art scene. Despite their ever-increasing contribution to the art world, Cuban-American artists did not always fit into mainstream categories of American (i.e. Anglo) art critics as Mark E. Denaci explores in 'Challenging Orthodoxies: Cuban American Art and Postmodernist Criticism'. Ultimately, choices around continuity and discontinuity of traditions resonate with the question of balancing Cuban and American influences. Two chapters which examine and relate the work of (mostly renowned) Cuban-American visual artists to the 'Irony of Exile' (Carol Damian; p. 165) and to their shared 'history, experiences, and kinship' (Jorge J.E. Gracia; p. 187) point towards the notion that it might be the incessant search for *lo cubano-americano* which holds the community together across all ages, class, races and varied migratory differences. Much like the touring exhibition *Café*

which Andrea O'Reilly Herrera describes in the final chapter, Cuban-American literature and art mirror continuities and discontinuities that simultaneously constitute a collective understanding of what it means to feel connected to both sides of the Florida Straits:

The space in which *Café* is exhibited is, therefore, yet another variation of the polyrhythmic, for it also connotes differences and repetition, transformation and continuity in an every-changing transnational diasporic context (p. 197).

Cuban-American Literature and Art is a must-read for scholars working in the immediate vicinity of the academic field outlined by the book's title. In addition, it is of interest to academics concerned with the wider field of Cultural Studies, especially those with a focus on Hispanic and Caribbean communities and their diasporas. The anthology makes for an excellent starting point of comparative studies between Cuban-Americans and other Hispanic/Latino groups based in the United States. A meticulous index and the option to read chapters as stand-alone pieces make it appealing to readers with a broad as well as a specific interest in the subjects. No doubt it will find its way onto numerous bookshelves as its canonical potential is twofold: firstly, because of the literature and art examined, and secondly, because of the personae of the contributing authors themselves. The latter also makes it a significant contribution to the growing field of ethnic American self-study.