

Bridges
to Cuba

Puentes
a Cuba

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INTRODUCTION

Un puente, un gran puente, no se le ve,
sus aguas hirvientes, congeladas,
rebotan contra la última pared defensiva.

A bridge, a great bridge, that can't be seen,
its boiling, frozen waters
batter against the last defensive wall.

—José Lezama Lima

Las paredes	Walls
vueltas de lado	turned on their sides
son puentes.	are bridges.

—Anonymous. A message on a 1994 New Year's greeting card from Cuba

Once upon a time, Cuba was such a commonplace of the United States's imagination that it was included in maps of Florida. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and Fidel Castro's declaration that Cuba would be resculpted as a communist nation, the United States sent the island into exile. A blockade was imposed, cutting off communication with a Cuba that had fallen from grace into the arms of the enemy, the Soviet Union. Cuba, in turn, accepted the blockade as the price of independence. Suddenly, inexorably, a hundred years of connections between Cuba and the United States were severed. Cuba became, in the words of U.S. policy analyst Mario Lazo, a "dagger in the heart" of this country.

Lately that dagger has lost its edge, its ability to wound, even its precise location on the map. A filmmaker from the island, visiting the United States in 1993, told me that when he was introduced to a medical doctor in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the doctor remarked, "Oh, so you're from Cuba? Nice to meet you. I lived in Nepal for five years." Stunned by this surrealistic encounter, the filmmaker didn't know what to reply. The doctor was suggesting that Cuba and Nepal were somehow related to each other. And maybe they are. The longest ninety miles separate the tip of Florida from the island of Cuba. Cuba, it seems, now borders on Nepal.

Only the United States could erase Cuba from its map of the world. Cuba tried but never could manage to erase the United States from its map. The fact is that Cuba and its diaspora are always defined within a U.S. framework, on the right and the left. Indeed, after the revolution the nation split apart precisely between those who stayed, to live with their backs turned against the great power to the North, and those who left and took refuge in the belly of the beast. The powerful and unyielding groups within the Cuban American exile lobby—that not only refuse any kind of contact with the contemporary island but frequently use violence to terrorize those Cuban Americans seeking to forge connections—could not exist without tacit U.S. support. Other players within the North American left, in seeking to highlight the inhumane aspects of the blockade and provide unequivocal support for Cuba's right to self-determination, sometimes impose their own hard line about what can or cannot be said about Cuba, unwittingly closing off possibilities for constructive debates.

Cuba since the revolution has been imagined as either a utopia or a backward police state. Cuba, viewed with utopian eyes, is a defiant little island that has dared to step on the toes of a great superpower and dreamed ambitiously of undoing the legacy of poverty, inequality, and unfulfilled revolutions that has plagued Latin America and the Caribbean. Alternately, as newspaper headlines in the U.S. media like to declare, Cuba is "an island of lost souls," a place where "huddled masses yearn for the comforts of life" and will sacrifice everything to leave, plunging into the "deadly sea of dreams" as *balseros* (raft people) or Cuban "wetbacks." Within this conflicting web of representations born of the Cold War, there is little room for a more nuanced and complex vision of how Cubans on the island and in the diaspora give meaning to their lives, their identity, and their culture in the aftermath of a battle that has split the nation at the root.

Bridges to Cuba, which began as a special double issue of *Michigan*

Quarterly Review, grew out of the conviction that there is another map of Cuba, a map crosscut with contradictory desires and yet luminous, like our cover art by Nereida García Ferraz, whose own quest for a bridge to Cuba is the subject of all her work. The enthusiasm and support of Cuban artists and intellectuals, as well as the quantity and quality of manuscripts and artworks that found their way to Michigan, exceeded our wildest expectations and convinced us that a great many original, brave, exciting, and compassionate Cuban voices, inside and outside the island, had yet to be heard. News of the project spread by word of mouth, here as well as in Cuba. As the chorus of voices and visions grew in strength, it became clear that there is an immense need for a forum such as this, in which Cubans can openly define themselves and dismantle, once and for all, the hurtful stereotypes of the islander as a brainwashed cog of a Marxist state and the immigrant as a soulless worm lacking any concern for social justice.

Given the obstacles to phone and mail communication, it was difficult for work from the island to reach us. After repeated efforts and visits, I succeeded in gathering together something of a sampling of poetry especially, one of the most popular Cuban genres. Manuscripts frequently came on frail or recycled paper, typed with faded ribbons, often in handmade envelopes. On the island, writing is truly a heroic act. With the loss of economic support from socialist Europe, there are continual blackouts and food shortages. The once vibrant publishing world, for which Havana was well known, has withered, as even *Granma*, the state newspaper, has been reduced to a single newspaper sheet folded in half. For most of the island participants, this publication is their debut not only in English but in the United States.

On this side, not all responses were positive. I received an angry and sarcastic letter from a Miami Cuban poet who said my head was stuck in an academic Michigan cloud. Refusing to participate, he wrote, "Tell me, Professor Behar, how would you go about editing a 'Building Bridges' issue focusing on apartheid South Africa, the Argentina of the Dirty War, or Nazi Germany?" All the links he drew seemed to me grossly inaccurate, but the comparison he made between Cuba and Nazi Germany pained me profoundly because it was an undignified manipulation of the massacre of six million Jews and others in Europe. A poet cruel to history, I decided, is cruel to poetry.

Yet this letter foreshadowed other critical responses I would receive from members of the second generation of Cuban Americans who feel it is impossible, even absurd, to build a bridge to Cuba so long as the regime of Fidel Castro remains in power. A flurry of such responses

arrived after I published "A Bridge to Cuba," an op-ed essay in the *New York Times* in 1992. In this essay I stated that there is a second generation of Cuban Americans who want to go beyond the Castro fixation and create cultural and emotional ties among *all* Cuban people. I had tried, in the first draft, to get away with not mentioning Fidel Castro, but a *Times* editor insisted that any opinion piece on Cuba must take a stand on Him. Indeed, as Alan West shows in his essay "My Life with Fidel Castro," the charismatic leader has come to embody the rifts in the nation of Cuba, "as persecuted and prosecutor, as hope and desperation, as rigidity and flexibility, as myth and history."

Normally, an essay such as my op-ed would have called forth harsh criticism and ridicule by the Cuban American radio talk shows in Miami. But it happens that the essay appeared exactly when a spectacular dramatic escape from Cuba to the United States took place. My essay was published on December 18. The very next day Orestes Lorenzo, a former Cuban Air Force pilot honored for his bravery in Angola, swooped down near the Varadero coastline with a borrowed plane, picked up his wife and sons, and delivered them safe and sound to the United States. Immediately given hero status, Orestes Lorenzo appeared on the *Tonight Show* to speak about his daring "act of love," which had captured "mid-America's heart." He was appointed grand marshal of the parade at Disneyland, where he communed with none other than Mickey Mouse—the ultimate validation of his arrival on this side of the border.

Orestes Lorenzo undertook his daredevil escapade because the Cuban government refused to let his family go. Raúl Castro had also challenged Lorenzo's masculinity by saying that if he were such a macho he should return to Cuba himself for his family. But Orestes Lorenzo didn't become embittered. Two months into his welcome in the United States, he began to call for a floating "Crusade of Love" from the Florida Straits to El Malecón, Havana's seafront. In their boats, he urged Cuban Americans to take clothing, food, and medicines, not bullets. That way Cubans on the island would know they had nothing to fear from their brothers and sisters across the straits. By making this declaration Lorenzo tarnished his own heroic image within the Cuban American exile community and quickly lost credibility. Soon after, he stopped dreaming aloud.

Like Orestes Lorenzo's vision of the floating crusade of love, this vision of bridges to Cuba will not please everybody. It may, indeed, please nobody. On this side, people may find it too soft on Castro. On the other side, it may seem too heterodox. That is the risk you take with Cuban matters. Freedom of speech in the Cuban community, on both sides, is an ideal that has yet to be fully realized. But, as Marilyn Bobes

suggests in her elliptical, self-censored poem, there are dangers both in speaking and in staying quiet. Without being deluded about the failings of their respective societies, the participants in *Bridges to Cuba* affirm, in voices that are earnest, angry, witty, and hopeful, that it is possible to go beyond the polarizations of Cold War thinking.

Now that the Berlin Wall has been ground to dust, the Soviet Union dissolved, and the United States trade embargo against Vietnam recently lifted, the Cold War would seem to be over. Yet even in the midst of so many global shifts, where U.S.-Cuban relations are concerned, the war is still quite *hot*. For the last thirty-five years, while North Americans have been unable to vacation on the island that was once their backyard, this heat has consumed Cuban life on both sides of the ocean wall. Our tables, clothes, and flesh, as poet Victor Fowler Calzada writes, are covered with burn marks. Nothing lost will come back with the rain, but many of us now long for the cleansing waters of mutual understanding and forgiveness.

Bridges to Cuba is a meeting place, an open letter, a castle in the sand, an imaginary homeland. It is a space for reconciliation, imaginative speculation, and renewal. It is a first-time event. "Diaspora, like death, interrupts all conversation," writes Jorge Luis Arcos from the island. After being "enemies," it isn't easy to trust one another. But conversations can begin again. Walls can be turned on their side so they become bridges. It is possible to resurrect ourselves. As Jesús Barquet writes from this side, "Let's think of the bridges peace could bring us."

The work that graces the front and back covers of this book is an effort precisely to envision an artistic bridge between the work of Nereida García Ferraz, who lives in the United States, and Rolando Estévez, who lives in Cuba. The title of Nereida García Ferraz's work, *Es agradable pero no es el correr* ("It's agreeable but it isn't the same as running"), a line of poetry from the pen of Fernando Pessoa, suggests that, despite our best intentions, there are limits to the desire to imagine another map of Cuba. The boat in her painting is much too large to cross under the bridges uniting the islands to the mainland. As a counterpoint to this Cuban American vision, our back cover features the work of Rolando Estévez, *Cuerpo de lágrimas* ("Body of Tears"), who from the island offers us a view not of a bridge but of a wall, on which boats and rafts slip and slide, a wall driven into the body of a man, a body of tears. Estévez was left behind in Cuba when he was fifteen after his parents and sister went into exile in the United States. Twenty-five years later, his work as an artist offers a moving reflection on the wrenching consequences of that family separation. When will the day come, his work seems to ask,

when that wall, built of so much hurt, so much loss, will become a bridge? Or is it already too late?



Bridges to Cuba stems from a personal quest for memory and community. As a Cuban Jew growing up in the United States, where you can only check one box for your ethnic identity, I had often been questioned about the authenticity of my Cubanness. How could I, being Jewish, claim to be Cuban? Wasn't my Cuban identity nothing more than an accident of history, another stop in a Jewish diaspora? It wasn't deep, it wasn't in my blood, the Cubanness, so who was I fooling?

In our milieu I never thought of my "mixed" identity as strange or contradictory. Each of my grandparents arrived in Cuba, young, alone, searching for their America across the border, because as Jews from Poland and Turkey their entrance into the United States had been foreclosed by the 1924 Immigration and Nationality Act. My parents were born in Cuba, and they, like the friends in their circle, had constructed a cohesive Jewish Cuban identity for themselves—an identity explored in all its psychological depth by Ester Shapiro in her essay for this book. Reunited after the revolution in New York, we'd eat matzoh for a week during Passover then go with El Grupo to eat black beans, rice, fried plantains, and *palomilla* steak at La Rumba Restaurant. In many ways the Jewish members of El Grupo were no different from non-Jewish Cuban immigrants of the first generation. For that generation, Cuba represented nostalgia, a paradise lost, youthful dreams of social transformation gone sour. We had burnt the bridge back and were not to look behind, lest we turn into pillars of salt.

Like other Cuban Americans of the second generation who left the island as children, when I came of age I longed to return to Cuba and see the island with my own eyes. In 1979 I was finally able to go, with a group of students and professors from Princeton that included only one other Cuban American. At the time I was ignorant of the fact that groups of young Cuban Americans, organized in work brigades named after the Afro-Cuban Independence leader Antonio Maceo, were making pilgrimages to the island in an effort to open dialogue between the Cubans who left and the Cubans who stayed. In my solitude, I began to fear that it was foolish of me to desire a link to Cuba. Twelve years would pass before I would go back again, after a long detour living in villages in Spain and Mexico in the name of anthropology. Not that those years were wasted. From Spain I brought back a lived sense of the pueblos in

which so many Cubans (including Fidel Castro) claim their origins; and from Mexico I brought back the concept that the border with the United States is an open wound.

As I prepared to return again to Cuba in December of 1991, I became bedridden with a mysterious illness. My legs were too weak for me to stand on, and my heart beat terrifyingly quickly. I came to realize that my body was forcing me to confront the internalized blockade—my own profound terror about returning. That terror was compounded by intense family pressure. My parents demanded that I write out a will and leave them all the custody papers for my five-year-old son, who'd be staying behind with them. I believe it was the thought of never again seeing my son—who was the same age as I was when I left Cuba—that was most chilling.

With the paranoia of all my exiled ancestors on my back, I set off. To my surprise, I met extraordinary people in Cuba who appeared to be my mirror images. With my island counterparts, I seemed to reclaim not just by childhood but an imaginary adulthood, a parallel existence—the “ghost limbs” of which Teresa Marrero writes. They had been told by their parents to view the bridge to the United States as burnt and broken, just as my parents had told me not to look back to Cuba. On my return to the United States, I came into contact with networks of Cuban American scholars, activists, and artists living in Boston, New York, and Chicago who were also trying to resolve the puzzle of their connection to Cuba. They had distanced themselves from Miami's exile politics, hoping to find breathing space to articulate their sense of Cuban identity, without wallowing in nostalgia or being naive about the shortcomings of the revolution. All of us, Cubans of the second generation, inside and outside the island, had lived through an internal struggle between capitalism and communism, between our need to question inherited dogmas and our loyalty to family and community. We didn't want to wage the same struggles as our parents, yet we were still caught in the frameworks, fears, and silences of their generation.

Bridges to Cuba had been attempted before by members of my generation, most notably in the 1970s. There was a moment of euphoria in 1978 when it seemed as though “the dialogue,” involving 140 Cubans living outside the island and the government of Cuba, would heal the divided nation. Cuba immediately began the family reunification program, recognizing the right of all Cubans living abroad to visit their homeland. By 1979, a hundred thousand Cubans residing in the United States had returned to Cuba for one-week visits with their families.

Our suitcases were full of goods that were scarce or nonexistent in

Cuba. Even those of us who sympathized with the accomplishments of the revolution had not sweated out its hardships. The return of *la comunidad*, as Cubans living outside the island came to be called, unloosed repressed desires among many of those who had stayed. The storming of the Peruvian embassy in Havana in 1980 by Cubans demanding political asylum drove a wedge through the romance of "the dialogue." It led to the Mariel boatlift and the departure of 125,000 Cubans, even more than had returned to visit from the United States a year before. Among the "Marielitos" were many gay men who, along with others who left in 1980, were dubbed the scum of the revolution by the Castro regime in a sad effort to save face.

After Mariel, Cuba closed up once more like a clam to those of us who left. The nation continued divided, even more divided than before. It is through informal networks that family, artistic, and academic ties have been maintained. According to U.S. law, only those who have family in Cuba, or are going there to do research or journalism or offer humanitarian aid, may travel to Cuba. According to Cuban law, anyone born in Cuba, even if "naturalized" elsewhere, must return with a Cuban passport, or a reentry permit. For me, that passport, which might be seen as a ploy to extract revenues from those who've left, settled a lot of my postmodern doubts about multiple, inauthentic, and shifting identities. I was born in Cuba, so I'm Cuban, and that's it, case closed.

In the midst of the stand-off between Cuba and the United States, the Marazul ticket counter at the Miami airport became our borderland, that is, until the new regulations of August 1994, which have almost entirely restricted family visits. It was a theater of the absurd, where the concern for things took on obsessive dimensions. The forty-four pound limit on baggage was strictly enforced and every suitcase and carry-on bag going to Cuba got weighed. Women took to wearing several layers of clothing and putting hats on their heads crammed with costume jewelry. On their backs they carried stuffed Panda bears; around their waists they tied rings of sausage. Their huge plastic bags brimmed with bottles of aspirin, enough for an eternity of headaches. At the grass roots, rigid categories like communist or capitalist cease to be relevant. It is there that the wall is bridged daily.

Those of us who continue to travel back and forth are the bridge between the island and the exile. We carry letters, dreams, grief, from one side to the other. Returning from Havana, I brought back the letter-poem that Jorge Luis Arcos wrote for his friend, Jose Luis Ferrer, now living in Miami. On a trip to Havana, I took an actual letter that Teresa Marrero had written to her cousin. I felt I had crossed into a strange

limbo by being the bridge between the two cousins of "Ghost Limbs" who in real life had yet to meet. (Now Marrero's cousin lives in Miami.) Communications with Cuba are such a peculiar combination of the near and the far that it is difficult to imagine the day when you will be able to post a letter through regular mail and have it arrive. And yet increasingly Cuba draws closer. Thanks to AT&T, direct dialing to Cuba is now possible. It's no longer necessary for me to go to Havana to catch the film *Strawberry and Chocolate*. I can see it in Ann Arbor, with popcorn on my lap.



Looking back at that first effort to build bridges, I am struck by the central role played by two brilliant Cuban American women. Both Lourdes Casal (who died in 1981) and Ana Mendieta (who died in 1985) were at the height of their creative powers when death claimed them. Both women turned their preoccupation with Cuba into the stuff of art, shaping the worldview of an entire generation of Cuban Americans.

There is no question that the first plank of the bridge to Cuba was thrown into the sea by Lourdes Casal, a woman of middle-class background whose own mix of African, Spanish, and Chinese heritage epitomized the mosaic of Cuban culture. As a psychology professor in the United States, Lourdes Casal conducted scholarship on Cuban immigration and also wrote poetry and stories in Spanish. She helped found the magazine *Areíto*, a predecessor to this project, which published the works of Cubans inside and outside the island. Initially part of a counter-revolutionary group, Casal had a change of heart in the 1970s and became an active supporter of the Cuban Revolution. She was the first Cuban expatriate intellectual to go back to Cuba, and on her return to the United States she urged young people of the second generation to join her. Casal became the "mother" of the Antonio Maceo brigade and in 1977 led the first group of fifty-five young Cuban Americans on their return to Cuba, where they were perceived as the lost children of the Revolution. A film by Jesús Díaz about the group, titled *55 Hermanos*, was widely shown in Cuba and proved heartrending, showing the suffering created by the division of families and the splitting apart of a nation.

Young Cuban Americans who returned to Cuba as *Maceítos* hoped to prove that they were not *gusanos*, the worms of the revolution. This took great courage, for they were often cast out not only by their families and community but by sectors of the North American left. Maria de los Angeles Torres recalls how she was rejected by North Americans involved in the Venceremos Brigade: "These experiences were perhaps the

worst. They relished having a connection to Cuba and authoritatively spewed the rhetoric claiming that we could not return for we were 'gusanos' who had abandoned the revolution. 'Yes, but I was six years old! I'd say. They would respond, 'So what, you were obviously middle-class, and as such your class origins make you unworthy of return.' The hypocrisy of their statements still stings today: none of them were working-class either. We, Cubans in the United States, had become the community of color that white North Americans could discriminate against, ironically with the help of the Cuban government."

Misunderstood in turn by their parents, who'd worked hard to make it in the United States and expected their children to be grateful, the Maceítos struggled to create a new identity on the borderlands. Many of them felt they returned to Cuba with their "hearts in their hands," but their innocence was met with suspicion and intense scrutiny. Lourdes Casal's poem, "For Ana Veldford," with its lines about being "too *habanera* to be *newyorkina* and too *newyorkina* to be anything else," spoke for a generation of Cuban Americans who reclaimed the lost country of their childhood, recognizing that immigration had left them unable to think of home as being in any one place. And as Nancy Morejón makes clear in our interview, Casal's poem, like her return, also spoke to those Cubans who stayed but wanted to reopen conversation with those who had left.

In one of her *descargas*, Lourdes Casal had written about the irony of occupying the position of the *turista político*, the political tourist who returns to Cuba for an academic vacation. Casal recognized, as do the various contributors who tell the stories of their return visits to the island, that those of us who go back must confront not only our traumas and grief but the reality of contemporary Cuba. This means facing the fact that we've grown away from that reality and that with our all-too-brief visits we may, indeed, never fully get to know it. Many of those returning are children from the earliest waves of migration, composed of the white upper and middle classes, who've needed to reorient themselves within a society that now legitimates the African contributions to Cuban culture, such as Santería. Cubans on the island, in turn, must overcome their suspicion that Cuban Americans are back for a re-encounter with their roots that is self-indulgent and ultimately frivolous. If we can get beyond our mutual doubts, we might recognize the creativity and desire for memory and community that is being released on both sides.

Ana Mendieta was unusual in that she did inspire such trust and hope. For Ana Mendieta, the question of reestablishing roots in the soil of Cuba took on a meaning at once spiritual and material. As an art student

at the University of Iowa, she gave up painting because it wasn't "real enough." She wanted her images "to have power, to be magic." This led her to use her own body as the primary material of her art and to draw upon ritual elements from Santería. In Mexico, she lay down naked on a Zapotec site, surrounded by flowers; later, she had a firework piece made in the shape of her silhouette and ignited it, so that her body was at once consumed and resurrected in the flames. On her first return trip to Cuba in 1980, all Ana Mendieta brought back was earth and sand from Varadero Beach, where she spent many happy days of her childhood, as her cousin Raquel (Kaki) Mendieta poignantly remembers. In time she would obtain permission to carve exaggerated female figures in the caves of the Jaruco Mountains outside of Havana, fulfilling her ideal of creating sculpture in a natural site, where it could eventually be reclaimed by the earth. And in turn, as Nancy Morejón writes, the rocks and caves of Jaruco also became hers.

Ana Mendieta had written, "There is no past to redeem: there is the void, the orphanhood, the unbaptized earth of the beginning, the time that from within the earth looks upon us. There is above all the search for origin." She wasn't being abstract; Ana Mendieta, who began life in an aristocratic white Cuban family, truly ended up an orphan. Along with many thousands of young Cubans, she and her sister had been sent alone to the United States, ending up in Iowa through the Peter Pan Operation, which sought to save children from communist indoctrination. She never recovered from her sense of orphanhood. Falling to her death from the thirty-fourth floor of a New York City apartment building, she left behind a form of art as evanescent as a sand castle.

And yet her art became a lasting inspiration for Cuban artists inside and outside Cuba. In 1983 she became the first Cuban American artist to have her work exhibited in Cuba. Twelve years later, the Brooklyn-based Cuban artist Ernesto Pujol has become the second artist living outside the island to have his work exhibited in Havana (the Boston-based artist Natalia Raphael exhibited her work in Matanzas in 1994). Using furniture, suitcases, and other objects borrowed from Cuban homes, Pujol set up a series of temporary installations entitled "Los hijos de Pedro Pan" (The Children of Peter Pan) as a way of marking the loss of the island to the whole second generation. This work was dedicated to Ana Mendieta, whose dream of a bridge to Cuba haunts the corn fields of Iowa.



The sexual metaphors underlying U.S.-Cuban relations have never been far below the surface. As Louis Pérez notes, "the North American re-

solve to possess Cuba and the Cuban determination to resist possession became part of each, an obsession for both." In seeking to free Cuba from its position as a colony of the United States, the Cuban Revolution hoped to redeem an emasculated nation. Manhood and nationhood, in the figure of the Cuban revolutionary hero, were fused and confused. Redeeming the nation required the creation not so much of a new woman but of a new man, as even Cuban films about women such as *Portrait of Teresa* clearly showed. The recent film *Strawberry and Chocolate*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for best foreign film, is another case in point. Nothing has ever seemed to threaten the utopia of new men more terribly than homosexuality.

Manhood is an integral part of the counterrevolution too. As Flavio Risech points out, "neither *revolucionario* nor anticommunist *gusano* can be a *maricón* [queer]." On this side it is unforgiving and scolding father voices, like that of Jorge Mas Canosa of the Cuban American National Foundation, that attain power; the ostentatiously romantic Ricky Ricardo types such as Orestes Lorenzo attain glamour. The voice of a strong-minded woman like Alina Fernández is heard because she is the estranged daughter of Fidel Castro. If national identity is primarily a problem of *male* identity, how are Cuban women on both sides to write themselves into Cuban history?

As a work that reinserts women into the Cuban national narrative, Cristina Garcia's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* is a major historical event. It is the first novel written in English by a Cuban American woman of the second generation that transgresses the border between the United States and Cuba by giving voice to three generations of women divided by revolution and exile. As Garcia says in her interview with Iraida López, "Traditional history . . . obviates women . . . and basically becomes a recording of battles and wars and dubious accomplishments of men. You learn where politics really lie at home." In a situation where there is no bridge linking the two sides of the Cuban community, Garcia suggests that women's dreams can begin to heal the wounds of the divided nation.

Our collection offers several examples of how women's subtle rereadings of Cuban history and contemporary politics can offer crucial insights. In her chronologically scrambled diary, Coco Fusco imagines herself as a late-twentieth-century Miranda, reclaiming the central female figure of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as "the Cold War, that modern day tempest, subsides." Patricia Boero, who returned to live in Cuba for five years, tells of how the memory of her deaf cousin Raysa stays with her, as she uses "her eyes to read the world, imagining it sometimes devoid of

sound, as she knows it, and free of dogmatic speeches and hurtful words, like *gusano*, and rigid categories like *comunista* or *capitalista*.” The two women cousins of Teresa Marrero’s “Ghost Limbs” likewise go beyond the communist/capitalist split as they try to make sense of their lives for each other.

Ester Shapiro, in turn, recalls how when she returned from Cuba her father continued, “resentful and embattled, to insist that I was betraying the family with my communist sympathies.” Her mother, aunt, and female cousin instead “pored over the photographs of our old neighborhoods in El Vedado, the intimately known streets of old colonial Habana, surprised and delighted to see the preservation of their lost, once much-loved world.” And Nancy Morejón, whose commitment to the revolution has always been strong, nevertheless dedicates two of her poems to Cuban American women who became her friends.

There are, of course, contradictions to being a woman of the border. Maria de los Angeles Torres writes, “I am ‘white’ when I wake up in Havana, but I am ‘other’ because of my migratory experience. I am again ‘other’ when I journey the thirty minutes through airspace to Miami, because I am no longer ‘white,’ and because my commitment to return to Cuba and have a normal relationship with my home country makes me politically ‘other’ among Miami Cubans. I arrive in Chicago, and again I am other, now because I am Latina in a city which is defined in black and white.”

We should not forget that, in turn-of-the-century Cuban monuments, Independence is often figured as a woman. Zaida del Río, in the drawing she chose to illustrate her poem, shows a woman perched between flowing water and dark marks suggesting footprints on sand, memory, and losses. Perhaps the bridge to Cuba, like Independence, is best imagined in the shape of a woman.

Exile, in Spanish, is a male noun—*exilio*. Curiously too, most writing about the idea of exile is done by men. Is that because women don’t have countries to lose? Excilia Saldaña, an island poet, takes on the theme of exile in her long poem, “My Name,” an extract of which appears here in translation. The poem is a series of reflections on the meaning of her own name, a feminine version of exile—*excilia*. Excilia Saldaña told me she began to write her poem while traveling in Europe, which opened her eyes to the experience of displacement, an experience she had long avoided. When she was fifteen, she could have left Cuba with her father’s family but chose to stay behind with her grandmother, whose name was also Excilia. In her poem she celebrates her grandmother’s memory in a way that resonates nicely with Sonia Rivera Valdés recalling the grand-

mother whose grave she cannot visit; and with Carilda Oliver Labra recalling the grandfather she lost to immigration. But the main theme of Excilia Saldaña's poem is the other exile, the exile of those who stay behind, watching as everyone departs. As she writes, with irony, "They banished my name and banished me. / They condemned me to carry it / from door / to / door / as she who left or she to whom they've gone."



We associate nostalgia with the Cuban American exile sensibility of Miami.

On the island there is also nostalgia. In his play "Pearl of the Sea," which I saw performed in Havana, Abilio Estévez speaks of wanting to go "in search of the Island . . . to find it once more past the line of shadows of rhetoric and confusion." He describes his work as a play that would like to be a ritual or an invocation. It is, in the end, "an act of faith" about the desire for a common language of memory and culture that will reconstruct "the Island of all Cubans, of every time and place." One of the most poignant characters in his plays is Mercedes The Unsatisfied, who exclaims, "I cannot remember being born anywhere. I search and search, but there is no street in my memory." She describes memory as "that piece of old cake without salt or sugar." Yet the absence of memory, she realizes, is hunger.

Estévez's play stylistically enacts the process of remembering by being composed largely of quotations from Cuban poets and popular songs. Jorge Luis Arcos, too, uses a similar literary strategy in his poem. Marilyn Bobes in turn explores the patchiness of remembering by offering a half-erased version of a Quevedo poem.

Remembering is, indeed, the key theme of our issue, as it perhaps must be in any project focusing on the imagining of nationality and homeland. Perhaps that is why personal essays and poetry, both of which readily lend themselves to the exploration of memory's ambiguities, have played such an important role here. José Kozer, for example, reflects on the absurdity of returning to the past in a poem. Emilio Bejel confronts the fact that he has no memory and must invent "a false book of false stories." Mirtha Quintanales writes about traveling in a cardboard box, haunted by "hands without prints" that glide over her body. Flora González Mandri discovers that the Havana she knows is not built of true memories but of the literary imaginings of Cuban poets and writers. And Rosa Lowinger, whose job as an art conservator is "to repair things," lays claim to places like Trinidad that didn't form part of her parents' experience or memory and in that process truly makes Cuba her own.

Eduardo Aparicio's photo essay, parts of which were recently exhibited in Cuba, focuses its lens on the varied ways that Cubans have maintained their sense of identity. People are shown with things they've kept from the past, such as childhood passports, old photographs, and the map and flag of Cuba. But they are also shown remaking themselves in the present. There, too, is Cristina Riley-Lazo, no longer worried, as is her grandfather Mario Lazo, about Cuba being a dagger in the heart of the United States.



René Vázquez Díaz, a Cuban writer living in Sweden, tells Elena Martínez that what unites Cubans inside and outside is that “our grandmother is the same.” This book includes two short stories about Cuban grandmothers: a fable by the Cuban writer Senel Paz about a blind grandmother from the provinces who encounters Jesus Christ, and a comical tale by the Cuban American writer Elias Miguel Muñoz about the adventures of a visiting grandmother in the strange planet of the United States of America (Paz and Muñoz are paired up again in the two theatrical Cubas explored by Lillian Manzor-Coats). The grandmother has become a potent symbol within Cuban culture, on both sides, because she represents a figure who has grown old with our century, with the stops and starts of modernity, outliving the eras preceding and succeeding the Cuban Revolution.

Indeed, it is no accident that the Cuban poet Dulce María Loynaz, now 93, has become a kind of intellectual grandmother for Cuban writers and artists of the second generation, who have only recently discovered her. Her selected poems were published in Cuba in 1984 but only after nearly fifty years had gone by without any of her work appearing in print. Since 1992, when she won the prestigious Cervantes Prize for literature written in the Spanish language, all her poetry and fiction has belatedly become available in Cuba. As a hermetic writer who throughout her life has remained within the insular walls of her house and garden in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana, writing of roses, birds, bees, love, death, and eternity, philosophical and transcendental issues far removed from the political battlegrounds of the century, Dulce María Loynaz represents a courageous resistance, a womanist absence from male power struggles, a will to live that is exemplary. Pablo Armando Fernández, the Cuban poet and novelist who has been a bridge to so many Cuban Americans of the second generation seeking to reengage with the island, imaginatively compares Dulce María Loynaz to Emily Dickinson, the great reclusive woman poet of North American

literature. Mischievously, he acknowledges the obvious links between Dulce María Loynaz and other Latin American women poets of her time but remains firm in his vision of “bridges of the heart.” Indeed, the poems we include here by authors Reina María Rodríguez, Achy Obejas, Georgina Herrera, Lina de Feria, María Elena Cruz Varela, Yanai Manzor, and Carlota Caulfield are yet further testimony to the vigor with which Cuban women’s writing crosses all kinds of borders.

The artwork of Rolando Estévez (featured on our back cover and part pages), bridging the gap between word and image with Blakean splendor, reflects the strong engagement of a younger generation of Cuban writers and artists with the work of Dulce María Loynaz. I take pride in introducing to readers in the United States the work of Rolando Estévez, who has created, with editor and writer Alfredo Zaldívar, the joyful, hopeful, endless publications of *Vigía* in Matanzas, the “Athens of Cuba,” as that city of many bridges is known. In María Eugenia Alegría’s interview with Zaldívar and Estévez, they recount how they created an independent journal and publishing house that uses stencils, scrap paper, bits of cloth, calligraphy, and a mimeograph machine to produce artisanal books that hark back to the arts and crafts movement of the last century. The desire to make beautiful books—not just functional texts—at a moment of intense economic and moral crisis in socialist Cuba is not simply daring; it is an act of faith in the utter necessity of the cultural arts, without which life itself would become impoverished.

Outside of the island, in the belly of late capitalism, Cuban creativity necessarily takes other forms. Here, we present a range of visions of the remaking of Cuban culture in and around Miami, this city of immense contradictions, which Cubans have turned into their island away from the island. Short fiction by Virgil Suarez and Roberto Fernández offers us well-fleshed portraits of YUCAs (Young Upwardly Mobile Cuban Americans) as well as of working-class Cuban women employed in a southern Florida agricultural factory. Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s montage of images of the popular culture of Cuban Miami shows us that being lost in translation is not such a terribly tragic condition, after all. In contrast, Juan Leon, in his bold intertextual reading of Mark Twain, Edmundo Desnoes, and Roberto Fernández, offers a more somber vision of the way underdevelopment and modernity rub shoulders in the twin cities of Miami and Havana.

Cuban American identity is further explored by Eliana Rivero, who charts the process of coming to her Cubanness through interactions with Chicana/o and Nuyorican writers. Refusing to dwell on nostalgia, she concludes that one can be Cuban wherever one is, even on the U.S.-Mexican border. And yet even when one makes peace with one’s distance

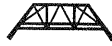
from Cuba, certain compulsions may remain, like Teofilo Ruiz's need to take people to the airport so he can say the last goodbye.

This project would have been incomplete without the voice of at least one of the "children of William Tell," the 1980s generation of nervy intellectuals, artists, and enfants terribles who left Cuba via Mexico at the end of the decade. Now, in the 1990s, artists such as Arturo Cuenca, Consuelo Castañeda, and Quisqueya Henríquez, whose work is featured in our portfolio, are remaking their professional lives in New York and Miami. Madeline Cámara explores this generation's notion of a "third option" and the new conjuncture created by the encounter, in the diaspora, of the children of William Tell and the children of the first wave of Cuban exiles. There is a deep irony to that encounter, for the children of the exiles are welcomed on the island if they want to build bridges, but the children of William Tell are rarely allowed to return home; as "velvet exiles" formed in the bosom of the revolution, their departure is a more stinging betrayal. And yet we must not forget, as Lourdes Gil shows in her essay about an earlier artistic diaspora to Paris, exile and the hope of return are part of the dialectic of Cuban history. Indeed, several of our contributors, who were living in Cuba when I began going to the island seeking bridges, have now crossed over to diaspora.

Blacks and Jews are two of the diasporic peoples who forged a new sense of home on Cuban soil, altering (and being altered by) ideas of "race" on the island. The legacy of the African presence in Cuba is found not only in the collective memory of slavery but in life-affirming music, literature, and spirituality derived from Yoruba, Bantú, and Abakuá influences. Those bridges are given artistic play in the work of Zaida del Río, Yolanda Fundora, Ernesto Pujol, and Osvaldo Mesa, and in the poetry of Miguel Barnet and Minerva Salado. In turn, the legacy of the Jewish boat people of the St. Louis, who (unlike the thousands that became Jewish Robinson Crusoes) were returned to Nazi Germany after being refused entry into Cuba, is portrayed in *Carnaval*, the play by Carmelita Tropicana and Uzi Parnes.

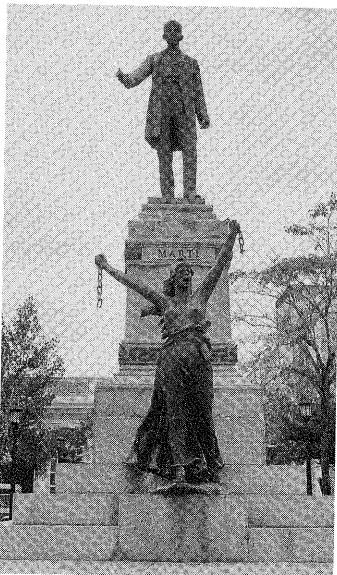
If Dulce María Loynaz represents the will to live, to persist to the end of the century and wherever it takes us, then Reinaldo Arenas represents the other face of the Cuban revolution, of homosexuality taken to the limits of machismo, of vengeance, anger, AIDS, nightfall, and suicide. Here, for what I believe is the first time, a brave writer from the island, Abilio Estévez, offers us a thoughtful and moving review of *Before Night Falls*, the final work of Arenas, an autobiography written in the turmoil of his last days suffering from AIDS. Arenas, who left Cuba unperceived in 1980 through Mariel after being jailed and forbidden to write, has yet to be revindicated in Cuba. When I approached Abilio Estévez about

writing a review of Arenas, I almost hoped he'd turn me down, but he replied that he felt it was his obligation. And so, through Abilio Estévez's pen, Arenas at last returns from exile to the "Island-mother who expels us and gathers us in." Despair is transformed into hope, into a bridge, a bridge to and from Cuba.



What, finally, is it that we expect this collection of words and images to accomplish? Cuba continues in the news, and its future is uncertain as ever. Those of us who long for bridges wait, our wings tense. Will the ocean wipe blood off Havana's old, salty seawalls? *Bridges to Cuba*, as it turns out, is less about dreaming in Cuban than about our awakening to a history that has yet to be resolved, let alone absolved.

I have been at a loss for a way to conclude this introduction to a project that marks the beginning, or perhaps the end, of a long process of reconciliation for a nation divided by revolution, the Cold War, and exile. So I turn to José Martí, the leader of the Cuban independence struggle, who is claimed as a hero on both sides of the Cuban border. Pity the nation that needs heroes, wrote Brecht. But fortunately for Cubans our hero had something to say about everything. Martí wrote: "*Los libros sirven para cerrar las heridas que las armas abren.*" Such is the hope of *Bridges to Cuba*—that this book will help to close the wounds that weapons have opened.



Statue of José Martí and Liberty. Central Plaza, Matanzas, Cuba. Photo by Ruth Behar, 1993.