

Exile, Cultural Survival and the Generations

Ricardo Pau-Llosa

Those of us who were born in Cuba in the fifties were children when Cuba passed from the kleptocracy of Fulgencio Batista to the totalitarian regime of Fidel Castro. Those of us from that generation who went into American exile with our parents in the early sixties, reached adolescence during the tumultuous sixties and seventies, a time when America threatened to break apart along racial, moral, economic, and above all generational lines. The gap between parents of the post-WWII era and their counter-culture oriented children could not have seemed larger or more ominous. Indeed, the very notion of generation had never—in America, at least—seemed so potent a principle through which to unify those who happened to be of the same age-group and simultaneously shatter something infinitely less random and more precious: a national identity that had been centuries in the forging. In fact, generation gaps have become a permanent fixture of the nation's identity.

Cuban-Americans who by date of birth coincided with the Baby Boomers, were caught up in America's battle between policy and soul. However, we were simultaneously steeped in another epic—that of Cuba's needless evisceration by criminals disguised as rebels whose ideology and rhetoric were being lionized by American youths. Most of us were bilingual by then, but being "bicultural" at that historical juncture entailed a far greater dilemma. Could we have two masters and not lose our souls—or our minds, for that matter? Cultural hyphenation was not a cosmopolitan limbo, nor was it a door to mind-expansive dual citizenship.

At that time of Vietnam and race riots and dope-induced Jacobin hysteria stirred by agents of an enemy empire bristling with warheads, the hyphen felt like a double-tipped dagger that pinned to us to a unique orphanhood. We were being mugged by history.

Our Cuban parents might have had to grapple with loss of country, accusation and guilt, the ordeal of rebuilding their economic and personal lives in a foreign land, and the unending eulogy for a native country that died in their arms. But we, their children, felt expulsion in a different way: not in the linear terms our parents felt it, with Cuba and America as points of origin and destination in a chartable trajectory of grief and geography. We felt expulsion as a vortex, like metal bits dragged by a magnet along the rim of a dark well.

Cuba was denied us, but America denied us. We were not at a crossroads; we were in a loop. Those Cuban-Americans whose families did not join in the second migration, from whatever US city our parents settled in first to Miami after the Freedom Flights began in 1965, were able to generate a somewhat viable microcosmic identity as a Cuban-American subset of the Boomer world-view.

The more extreme became odd-ball Spanish-surnamed hippies, or jipis, always, however, set apart by the exile's irrepressible knowledge of what real socialism does to people and nations. But those Cuban-Americans who reached adulthood in anywhere in America but Miami could at least negotiate conflicted world-views as millions of immigrants had done before them. Theirs was an experience closer to the traditional model of assimilation than what Cuban-Americans who reached adulthood in Miami went through.

Ironically, the fact that these Cuban-Americans were immersed in American culture far from the exile echo-chamber of Miami, eventually impelled many of them to acquire an urgency for cultural linkage to Cuba yet to be seen among their Miami-raised counterparts. For the latter, Cubanness was an atmospheric backdrop which needed no tending or conscientious absorption, akin to the heat and mosquitoes of summer. Or it became a trait that could be effortlessly shrugged off as a quaint obscurity when it came time to go away to college. And it could be dusted off after graduation, if they returned to Miami as most did, and donned like an ill-fitting guayabera for a Sunday of tías, abuelos, and arroz con pollo. Such are the soft, elegant passports of nostalgia among Miamians. Many New Jersey and Chicago Cuban-Americans, however, would surrender to a cathartic cubanidad as if by force of an irrepressible cultural gravity. For them, but not for Miamians, Cuba would be Ithaca.

Many Cuban-Americans in Miami developed a chiasmic counterpart to the adaptation of their brethren in other US cities. The Miami Cuban-American generated a Boomer subset of the Exile mindset, which was a much harder set of values to formulate and practice than the opposite strategy adopted by Cuban-Americans who had been raised elsewhere. The difficulties arise from the fuzzy generics of Cuban culture Miami nostalgics became experts at projecting, living in, and ultimately taking for an acceptable surrogate to the Cuba that died. Added to this was the density of the Cuban extended family which could short-circuit any excessive Americanization—long hair in boys, sexual freedom for girls—through that combination of ridicule, guilt, and thunderous family duty which most Mediterranean cultures, like that of Cuba, have elevated beyond an art form to a source of revelation. If for non-Miami Cuban-Americans the accent fell on the American hemisphere, for their co-generationalists in Miami, Cuba-as-function-of-family-allegiance became the primary shaper of collective and personal identity. Little wonder that so many of these survivors (escapees?) of South Florida upbringing would come to see America as Ithaca.

An important part of this horizon of assimilation vs. enclavisation was the varying degrees of cultural sophistication and self-confidence of the American natives Cuban exiles and their children would encounter in the US. The further north, the more urban the setting of exilic life, the more pressure the exile families felt to preserve their culture. They were, after all, surrounded by post WWII Americans in their triumphant industrial urban centers. Even the working class Americans of these colder climes exuded a confidence absent among the "natives" ensconced in South Florida before the Cuban exodus began. For American natives Miami was, and in many ways continues to be, a place where those who have failed elsewhere come to try their hand. Certainly this is true in the cultural, media and academic arenas. The exact opposite is true for the Cubans, whose educated and entrepreneurial elites had settled in Miami only because they were fleeing communism. They had little choice but to establish a temporary capital-in-exile in South Florida. Their flight spelled Cuba's economic ruin, even as it ensured the success of the totalitarian nightmare that would castigate most cruelly, and ironically, the lower classes it purported to represent and defend. The resentment Miami Cubans generally inspire among all other ethnic groups in South Florida stems in large part from the unspoken inferiority complex these other groups feel by the very fact that they are living in South Florida rather than in a real American city. History absolves the winners, but it is geography that indicts the losers.

Barely conscious of the resentments Cuban-American adults and their parents inspired in others, those who grew up in Miami would identify America as the theater of self-realization and individuality. Their co-generationalists who grew up elsewhere in America would come to see Cuban culture—though clearly and wisely not its political ethos, or lack of one—as a

touchstone for achieving self-realization and full individuality in America. The tragedy is that neither group can escape from the disabling lacunae their parents bequeathed them.(1) The Cuban culture Cuban-Americans outside Miami absorb is hopelessly distorted by the American cultural establishment, which alone offers them any insight or information about Cuba. This is, unequivocally, a cultural establishment still beholden to the brutal Cuban communist system and which parrots the official position of the regime on all matters, including culture. It is as if Telemachus was doomed to have a Trojan view of Ithaca compounded with a view of himself dictated by this mother's suitors.(2) On the other hand, the Miami Cuban-Americans cannot comprehend how Odysseus could turn his back on the golden thighs of an alien, immortalizing shore.

The children of Cuba's exiles are a case study in how parental indifference to cultural transmission manifests a group's self-loathing. More poignantly, it shows what happens when a group foolishly abandons the great epic it has lived in favor of immediate gratification of ego, pocket and appetite.

My own experience as a child refugee (DOA: December 1960, age six) who grew up to embrace, not without trepidation, Exile as destiny and calling, coalesces aspects of both these Cuban-American experiences. My family—parents, a grandmother, and an older sister—first settled in Chicago, arriving there by train, after a brief stop-over in Miami, late on a frigid Christmas Eve. Miami, the future "*capital del exilio*" and hip Babylon of infantile sensuality was, in 1960, a has-been resort with no employment opportunities. A year later we moved from Chicago to Tampa; it was warmer, closer to Cuba, and boasted a fledgling exile community that had found some solidarity among the American descendants of Cuban and { continues to be, a very dull place.

By 1968, a global watershed not to be surpassed for 21 years, we had moved to Miami. My working-class parents had managed, with great sacrifice and effort, to bring their two children to a place they hoped would become the next best thing to Havana. I was 14 when we moved to Miami, spoke broken Spanish, but was delighted to be in a place full of mobility, new arrivals, and both cultural and political effervescence. The Freedom Flights were bringing streams of exile, and to accommodate them, Miami was acquiring an urban and rapidly expanding economy. As a Cuban-American who had, so far, endured the difficulties of childhood as an alien among Americans, I would find myself having to adapt again, this time to Cuban recent arrivals who saw me as a strangely accented cultural oddity.

A true cross-section of the Cuban nation was now arriving in exile, and among them were the painters, sculptors and writers who could no longer live in the increasingly oppressive Cuba of Big Brother. I graduated high school in 1971, and it was around that time that the first Cuban exile art exhibitions began in Miami. The most well attended exhibitions took place in the lobby of the Bacardí Building on Biscayne Boulevard. It was a glass-walled space with temporary partitions to hang pictures on—far from a professionally equipped exhibition site, but it seemed like the MoMA to most of us, to me especially. Huge crowds descended on opening nights, and the rum flowed as the best art in Miami shone. Bacardí was the sweet temenos where Cuba would put aside its tortured self and appeared, instead, as a source of poetic images and transcendent ideas. Cuba was the muse that beckoned adventurers of the imagination. She sparkled as a heritage whose visual language and concepts were distinct from, and in many ways equal or superior to those of America. The Bacardí exhibitions offered epic on canvas, Ithaca in bronze.

For all the tropical intensity of the colors, and the wrenching power and sensuality of the forms, I felt these new images as inexplicably familiar—like an archetypal whisper in a dream I had dreamt before and would have to dream again because I always forgot how it went. I would go on to write about these artists, collect their work, curate exhibitions, lecture about them. Today, over three decades later, surrounded by a collection of Cuban and Latin American art that covers every inch of my walls, numerous catalogues and books on the subject—many of which I've written—I understand the opening line of an essay on Cuban exile art which I wrote in 1988 better than when I wrote it. "The exile knows his place, and that place is the imagination."(3) In my life and work, I have sought, in part, to build a diaphanous cocoon whose walls are images but whose purpose is,

like all cocoons, to shelter and nourish until the time comes to venture into a recovered landscape, into a horizon which will have no right to expel or deny, where self and space will exist in mutual belonging.

No doubt, part of the intensity of these cultural events was due to the fact that this art called to itself an entire people of diverse interests and professions—not just art lovers—and unified them in pleasure. This art exercised a magic over the full spectrum of the exile population which American art could not replicate among its own. Granted, Cuban art exhibitions drew much of its appeal from the powerful bond of early exile. The writers settled elsewhere, as did the musicians, but the painters tended to stay in Miami so they became the torch-bearers of the culture. The bond of exile, reflected in art's power of convocation, would soon dissipate and all but perish with the 1980 Mariel Exodus. From that point on, Cuban art exhibitions became much more professional, taking place in the new galleries of Coral Gables whose focus was now Latin America. New generations of artists would emerge in Miami, and subsequent waves of exiles would bring new artists from Cuba. But art's brief role as a unifying force in exile life would be gone for good.

As the Miami art scene became more dynamic and pan-Latin American, and more American as well, the role and importance of the first Cuban exile artists became obscured, even willfully ignored. There are various reasons for this. The most significant, obvious yet unspoken reason is political bias. Miami exile artists like José Mijares, Rafael Soriano, and Enrique Gay García belonged to the third generation of Cuban modernists, those born in the late twenties and thirties and who reached maturity precisely in the 60's, at the time Cuba was poised to emerge as a distinct modern Latin American culture with universal appeal. The Cubans of this generation were the hardest hit by the communist takeover and its inaugural terrors, and they fled into early, hungry exile. In securing survival for themselves and their families by whatever means, in totally alien settings, they often saw their professional dreams deferred for years. It was a reality that hit all exiles, but artists—always relegated to the last place in most cultures' inventory of priorities—were particularly affected.

For all their dedication and heroism, these third generation artists also presented non-Cubans with politically distasteful facts. Cuba in 1958 boasted a huge middle class and a modern culture which had produced a third generation of modernists. In contrast, America was just then moving from French Surrealist-inspired Abstract Expressionism to British-inspired Pop. The image of original, cosmopolitan Cuban artists working within their own solidified national tradition did not align with America's idea of immigrants nor with its new view of itself as the pre-eminent, cutting-edge culture of the postwar world. What's more, the very presence of these Cuban artists in exile belied communist Cuba's image as a cultural Mecca—a view which has been very much in vogue among American intellectuals, journalists, artists and art world big shots since the 60's. Nothing earns one obscurity faster than challenging the myths and stereotypes by which the privileged, however ignorant, map their importance.

When the children of the first exiles reached American maturity in the 80's and Cuban art became fashionable, these new Cuban-American collectors ignored the works of the critical third generation. They sought the paintings of the earlier modernists—Amelia Peléaz, Carlos Enríquez, Víctor Manue, Wifredo Lam, et al. Later they bought works by second generation artists like Cundo Bermúdez, Mario Carreño and René Portocarrero. Then they skipped the third generation altogether to collect works by new exiles who arrived in the 1980 Mariel exodus (e.g. Carlos Alfonzo), Cuban-Americans who were making waves in New York (e.g. Luis Cruz Azaceta), exiles who came in a subsequent wave in the early 90's (e.g. José Bedia), and more recently official artists of the Cuban regime (e.g. Kcho). With the exception of Kcho, all these are worthy artists, but the love of art is not, by and large, what drives these nouveau riches Dons of Hialeah by the Sea. They are mostly trophy-hunting collectors who buy in packs whatever fashion dictates, in their zeal for juicy returns on investments and/or the belchings of status. Impossible to imagine them interested in legacy or cultural continuity, or even in Cuba. To be fair, Cuban-American collectors, with rare exceptions, act no differently from art collectors anywhere else. The difference is, of course, the reality of exile and the failure of most Cubans to embrace a diaspora mentality. Faced with the continuous destruction of their national culture, the children of Cuba's exiles may pro-

claim their passion for all things Cuban, but they cannot even articulate the basic, urgent tasks and duties of exile, let alone satisfy them. For them Noah is an eccentric boat-builder with too much time and lumber on his hands and who's read one too many animal rights brochures.

But hope springs eternal from the heart of the single revolutionary economic system in the modern world: capitalism. As the market has priced works by early Cuban modernists out of the range of the most Cuban-American collectors, and forgers have succeeded in scaring the chronically uninformed, works by masters of Cuba's third generation may, at long last, be coming into their own—now that many are dead and others aged. It is but one more cruel, incomprehensible predilection of the Cuban mind in the handling of its legacy: it prefers to rob its own graves than tend a living garden. Mijares, Soriano, García, Hugo Consuegra, Antonia Eiriz, Agustín Fernández, Agustín Cárdenas and Rolando López Dirube certainly dominate this generation, but it includes many other worthy artists whose works—as a subsequent essay will make clear—are indispensable to simultaneously understand two critical cultural realities: Cuba's golden age, 1945-1958, and the foundation of Cuban cultural continuity outside the island, beginning in 1959—in freedom, in Exile.

(1) The failure of the exile parents to establish cultural institutions—a single Cuban museum exile would do—is dealt with in two previous essays: "Tasks of Exile," *Occasional Papers Series*, North-South Center, University of Miami, 1997 and "Wages of Exile," *Re-Membering Cuba*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera (Austin: U Texas Press, 2000).

(2) Far too many members of this generation have, in fact, been willing collaborators of Cuba's communist regime, without of course abandoning their residency in this capitalist democracy. They were—some still are—motivated by misplaced rebellion against their parents or the desire to find approval among liberal Americans (in either case, they suffer from arrested adolescence with a vengeance). Or they are driven by crass self-interest. In the seventies they joined groups like Antonio Maceo Brigade and *Areíto* and supported the abject *Diálogo* of the Carter era. They will be the focus of a separate essay.

(3) "Identity and Variations: Cuban Visual Thinking in Exile since 1959," in *Outside Cuba/Fuera de Cuba* (New Brunswick, NJ & Miami: Rutgers University & University of Miami, 1989), p.41. This is the book-length catalogue to the only historically oriented survey of Cuban art done in the United States since the seminal 1944 Modern Cuban Painters exhibition at the nascent Museum of Modern Art in New York. *Outside Cuba/Fuera de Cuba* opened at the Zimmerli Museum in Rutgers University in 1987 and traveled to various venues in the United States and Puerto Rico through 1989. I was one of the three curators, along with Ricardo Viera and Inverna Lockpez; the project was conceived and coordinated by the indefatigable Ileana Fuentes to whom Cuban art will always be in debt.

***All the paintings are the work of Cuban painter Hugo Consuegra. We are indebted to his wife and daughter for their permission to reproduce them.**

Ricardo Pau-Llosa is a widely published poet whose last three books are from Carnegie Mellon University Press, the most recent being *THE MASTERY IMPULSE* (2003). He is also a recognized authority on Latin American art.

His website is: www.pau-llosa.com