

Preface

In our age men distrust the Western universe and do not expect much of the future except, perhaps, Crusoe's luck, a personal island off the beaten track.

ERIC J. HOBSBAWM,
"The Principle of Hope"

*¡Ay, Cuba hermosa, primorosa!,
¿por qué sufres hoy tanto quebranto?*
ELISEO GRENET, "Lamento cubano"

*E*nduring Cuba collects thirty of the essays that I have mostly written in English over the past thirty years, some of which had remained unpublished. Most deal with literature but some intersect forays into history, politics, and art, including music. Indeed, such intersection, polemical perhaps, constitutes their common theme and makes them timely, too, particularly today when culture rather than literature, or art, or even politics, is meant to carry the day for civic responsibility in critical work. The present gathering joins books in Spanish written earlier plus two more in my own brand of English that I put together over the years, but this one title improves upon the personal edge I had aimed for in the previous ones.

Cuba endures, well into the 21st century, following more than half a century of dictatorship, renewed diplomatic relations with the U.S. notwithstanding; in turn, I too, an exile since age 12, endure Cuba, perhaps not with the island's daily resilience—evident in the

plethora of reports on the subject—but certainly as a pained witness to those news and as part of a U.S. Hispanic minority that is often denied rights to its opposition to that dictatorship, sometimes even rights to being a minority at all. To be sure, not all the pieces gathered here deal with Cuba, or dictatorship, or exile—at least not in the direct way that an essay like “Unburnt Bridges” does. The ones that do verge on those subjects, however, set the tone for much of a book about contexts, one foundational figure, and readings.

“Contexts,” the first section, ranges thematically from Cuban issues to general Latin American questions that ultimately lead onto the questionable pedagogy that I find in so-called Cultural Studies. My concerns about both national identity and the literary canon hail from the 1990s, when, as one of four rotating editors of the journal *Cuban Studies*, I broached those themes in prefaces for relevant issues. Twenty years later, my views have hardly veered. There still is, despite a wealth of bibliography, little conceptual grasp of Cuban national identity, at least not in the fruitful ways in which other nations, like Mexico or Brazil, articulate it, even when they also aim to dismantle it. In turn, the question of a viable literary canon remains today a silly chimera under the mirage of a dreary half-century of cultural policy that hoards discussion and discriminates according to who is deemed to be “within or against” the Revolution. Other yet broader pieces—on the Cuban version of *Glasnost*, or millennium icons—might seem dated, but they remain relevant, I believe, because they raise questions that, even today, are not pursued, much less resolved. Witness, for that matter, the twin concepts of “Latinamericanism and Restitution,” which, first raised in separate articles, I thrust together as part of an academic survey meant originally to be decisive and proleptic about future critical scholarship, and yet, along with those other harvests, has since borne uncertain fruit.

I wrote in Spanish the pieces gathered under “Thinking Through José Martí,” the second section, as part of a separate book on the historical significance of this central Cuban writer, thinker, and foundational figure. My readings on Martí’s instrumental use as part of state monopoly on the subject revise a rainbow of

themes—from the mirage of the figural interpretations of revolutionary history, to the sloppy pseudo-theology surrounding a canonical text like “Nuestra América” (1891). And yet, the section begins with a broad pedagogical survey on the 19th century, originally a lecture before a non-specialized audience, and ends with a confessional piece on family lore, which, as fate had it, thrust me closer to Martí than I ever imagined.

The last section, which gathers different “Readings,” starts out reverting to the life and poetry of Pablo Neruda, subject of my first book. The rest of those readings show further predilections—from major figures like Borges and Paz—to several Cuban writers, Cabrera Infante, Desnoes, Sarduy, Pau-Llosa, among others. Each one tackles, as well, issues of textuality, reception and interpretation. Hence what I take to be Neruda’s fissure into generous and liberal, then petty and sectarian. Or else, the various versions, novel and film, of an epoch-making story like *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1972); Severo Sarduy’s parody, through allusion to a seemingly obscure concept in Heidegger, of the search for identity; or the mask-making itinerary in Cabrera Infante’s life and work. Last, both pieces on Octavio Paz, subject of my ongoing work, grapple respectively with questions of interpretation: the canonical *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), and the ineffable *Blanco* (1966).

Three pieces of art criticism end this last section and the book. They act jointly in a kind of implicit protest, as bookend to the first section, which, as noted, ends with a meditation on Cultural Studies and its seemingly odd failure to account for Culture—precisely what its tag seemingly promotes. One fact which, placed at first, that brief essay underscores therefore surfaces at this other end: literature and art continue to be produced in huge quantities, and yet the “culture industry” that currently rules over our academy fails to train those who are called upon to judge it.

Not unlike Cuba, or me, literature, art, and of course culture, *endure*.

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