

## **Toward an Expanded *Cubanidad*:**

Foucault's Aesthetics of the Self and the Embodiment of Revolutionary Subjectivities

**Catherine Chaput**

English Department  
University of Nevada, Reno

\*Correspondence author at: [cchaput@unr.edu](mailto:cchaput@unr.edu)

**Submitted to "Territories: A Trans-Cultural Journal of Regional Studies" on  
February 2018**

**Accepted for publication on September 2018**

**Abstract (133):** Drawing from interviews with Cuban nationals during and shortly after the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Castro-led revolution, this essay explores *Cubanidad* or the dynamic and constantly evolving conception that Cubans have of themselves as revolutionary subjects. It does so by first outlining a Foucauldian framework that highlights the embodied, rather than ideological, constitution of subjectivity and offering a generative method for discourse analysis that moves against the dominant currents of binary containment. Second, it tracks the production of that embodied subjectivity backward through the revolutionary rhetoric of such foundational figures as José Martí and Ernesto (Che) Guevara as well as forward into divergent self-conceptions among contemporary Cubans. The essay ends by reflecting on the possibilities and limitations that this identity poses for the normalization of Cuba within the global political and economic community.

**Keywords:** *Cubanidad*, Foucault, embodiment, revolutionary subjectivity, rhetoric, discourse analysis

**Wordcount:** 11,876

## Introduction

In the special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* devoted to *La Idea de la Retórica Americana/ The Idea of American Rhetoric*, Christa Olson and René Agustín de los Santos characterize the majority of scholarship on American rhetoric beyond the U.S. border as limited by two foci. The lion's share explores the borderlands between the United States and Mexico and the rest addresses Spanish colonization of the Americas (195). Although these studies add invaluable insights to our understanding of the Americas, they remain bound within well-rehearsed power struggles. No doubt, the dominant imaginary of Cuba suffers from such dichotomizing pressures. Both popular and scholarly discussions often frame themselves within the opposition between dissidents and Fidelista/as, a tension further housed within the antagonism between capitalist democracy and communist authoritarianism. The revolutionary government, however, has outlasted the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the charismatic leadership of Fidel Castro who retired in 2008 and died in 2016; moreover, his brother Raul, who led Cuba for the last decade, has declined to seek re-election in 2018, paving the way for Miguel Díaz-Canel's presidency. Amid speculation about how these seismic changes will effect Cuba's position in the world (with particular stress on the possibility of Cuba becoming a market economy), the remarkable tenacity of Cuba's revolutionary identity—its particular *Cubanidad*—remains underexplored. As the fulcrum on which the future of Cuba pivots, this filiation with the revolution adjusts creatively to evolving historical contingencies shot through with, but not limited to, traditional colonial and capitalist binaries. The presumption that this identity will disappear with the Castro brothers underestimates its rhetorical power and limits the effectiveness of policy deliberation. Thus, with a focus on Cuba, this essay takes up Olson and de Los Santos's invitation to study alternative sites of American rhetoric using different theoretical frameworks.

It is certainly not the case that no one studies Cuban identity—indeed, a plethora of scholarship, including several important rhetorical analyses, exists—and, yet, these investigations tend to fall into the very binaries that Olson and de Los Santos wish to supersede.<sup>1</sup> Not only do they generally view Cuba through the political and economic struggles of colonialism and capitalism, they often extrapolate from one extraordinary experience and thus risk producing a picture of Cuban identity molded according to homogenizing dichotomies. Take, for instance, Elizabeth Lowry's analysis of the autobiography of Evangelina Cosío Cisneros. A Cuban born Cisneros narrates the threat of rape and her imprisonment at the hands of an unscrupulous Spanish authority.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the colonial dynamic, a discursive struggle emerges as William Randolph Hearst appropriates the text to foment popular opinion in favor of U.S. aggression against Spain. While this analysis places Cuba in opposition to Western imperial forces, first Spain and then the United States, other studies reflect the dichotomy between revolutionary loyalists and dissidents. Representative of this thread, Lisa M. Corrigan explores

---

<sup>1</sup> One notable exception is Abraham Romney whose analysis of escaped slave Juan Francisco Manzano's autobiography focuses on his self-education. This rhetorical view from the margins exemplifies an approach to American rhetoric that displaces the central role of Western colonialism.

<sup>2</sup> The autobiography is no longer under copyright and is easily available in the general domain: *The Story of Evangelina Cisneros (Evangelina Betancourt Cosío Y Cisneros) Told By Herself*. New York: Continental Publishing Company, 1897.

autobiographies of anti-revolutionary women as demonstrative of an alternative Cuban identity. As she sees it, authors like Flor Fernandez Barrios give glimpses into a past foreclosed by the revolution and others, like Ana Rodríguez, provide important accounts of how those opposed to Fidel's communist vision suffered under his rule (2008; 2011). Spanning a range of experiences, these rhetorical analyses situate Cuban voices within the predictable struggles of colonialism and capitalism, leaving a significant lacuna around how ordinary citizens in Cuba image themselves and their diverse everyday experiences in relationship to the pervasive revolutionary rhetoric and political stakes so clearly dramatized in these other studies.

Contributing a piece to the incomplete puzzle of Cuban identity, this essay studies the rhetorical subjectivities of contemporary Cubans deeply identified with the revolutionary project. As undeniable as this identification seems to be, it is not one well understood within an American imagination that rewrites unfamiliar experiences according to the logics of colonial rule and indigenous resistance or communist authoritarianism and capitalist freedom. Constituted beyond this imposed diagram of power, *Cubanidad* constantly reinvents the revolutionary project, exposing the limits of such binary thinking. Contrary to an essentialist identity, it is a dynamic conception of how Cubans view themselves in evolving times. Providing a glimpse into this process, this article unfolds in three parts. First, it grounds rhetorical identification within a Foucauldian framework that highlights the embodied, rather than ideological, constitution of subjectivity and offers a generative method for discourse analysis that moves against the dominant currents of containment. I illustrate this claim by placing historical voices in dialogue with contemporary ones. The second section traces the production of an embodied subjectivity through the revolutionary rhetoric of José Martí and Ernesto (Che) Guevara (displacing the centric position that Fidel Castro occupies in the prevailing imaginary) and the third section shows how contemporary Cubans reanimate those revolutionary voices within the exigencies of their own moment. Drawn from interview data, these voices neither abandon nor parrot the identity explicitly advocated by earlier revolutionary leaders; instead, they reinvent it according to multiple historical contingencies that need to be understood outside the rhetoric of containment imposed by the double binaries of colonialism and capitalism. The essay ends by reflecting on how this understanding of *Cubanidad* challenges the dominant containment rhetoric of Cuba and its citizens.

### **Rhetorical Invention: From Burkean Identification to Foucauldian Subjectification**

A giant of twentieth century rhetoric, Kenneth Burke emphasized the importance of identification. In addition to a well-reasoned argument, speakers, he asserted, must match their style with the collective expectations of an audience. As he saw it, “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (55). The ability to manufacture discourse within the recognizable rhythm, cadence, and idiom of an audience is, however, not sufficient. In fact, such attempts at identification can come across as rehearsed, inauthentic, and manipulative. To be perceived as genuine, stylistic identification requires that an author, in some mysterious way, become consubstantial with that audience. Burke instructs, “in being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. . . . Thus, he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (21). Because the body and its material world do not exist separate from the mind and its psychic world, identification is never

as simple as matching stylistics—a point recently forefronted by Diane Davis, Thomas Rickert, and a host of new materialist rhetoricians as well as by Debra Hawhee, Jenny Rice and others who focus on ecological and somatic rhetorics. These divergent theorists share a common belief in bodies as sites of non-conscious participation in persuasive communication. Such theorists, some of whom engage Burke, study the rhetorical ontology of bodies, objects, and environments as a way to deepen our critical interpretations. Less studied is the rhetorical production of such ontologies, an inquiry to which Michel Foucault dedicated his last years of research.

Just as Burkean identification is not fully explained by stylistic mimicry, Foucauldian subjectivity is not limited to the imposition of disciplinary power. Both theories include the former practice but hinge on a further embodiment for their success. According to Foucault, disciplinary power works in tandem with knowledge in order to transform a subject's disposition—a corporeal grounding for the spontaneous warrants that constitute what Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy recently labeled rhetoric's ontological capacity. This capacity—"what a particular kind of rhetoric can do in an adaptive dynamic system"—fuels the potential of material bodies (Stormer and McGreavy 7). Foucault characterizes it this way: a "capillary form of power" enters "bodies and gets a hold on them" so as to "direct what Servan called 'the soft fibers of the brain'" (PP 40). He calls this process "the synaptic contact of bodies-power" (PP 40) or the "*anatomo-politics of the human body*" (HS 139). I read his stress on brains, fibers, and capillaries literally. Power's ultimate object is a body whose biologically structured desires can be manufactured, maintained, and transformed through networks of discursive relations. From this perspective, discourse creates subjects because it interacts with synoptic firings, blood circulation, and muscular contractions. These bodily functions—the raw material of life—are, for Foucault, the substance of subject formation. In other words, subjectivity emerges through "a power thought of as physical action" (STP 49). Rather than an unchanging genetic or transcendental core, nature reflects a *bios* that can be engaged and shaped so as to produce subjects who conform to a range of practices proximate to an ideal norm.

This bodily capacitation means, for Foucault, that the subjectification process extends beyond ideology as a conscious value system and into the fleshly world of autonomous action that takes place before conscious assessments. He offers a theory of subjectivity uncontained by the binary of "obedient subject/ delinquent opposition" (STP 44). For Foucault, disciplinary power produces subjects pulled toward a target ideal; and yet those subjects never fully conform to that ideal because the human capacity for self-determination and difference always vies for power. A dynamic complex of ever-evolving identifications, subject formation must be studied as a multi-dimensional, organic process and not as a binary struggle.

From such a perspective, there are no preconceived revolutionary and counter-revolutionary subjects who use rhetoric to achieve specific political ends; instead, there are political subjects in the ongoing process of rhetorical becoming. Studying such a fluctuating scene requires a critic to track the web-like powers pulling subjects toward a centralized identity as well as the equally intricate powers fragmenting outward and to do so without falling back on a linear dynamic of imposed power and its resistance. As opposed to viewing discourse as the residue of an official ideology and its relationship to the political economic goals of state power, Foucault searches for the mismatches between rules of discursive formation and the lived experience of divergent subjects. He takes the entire terrain of subjectification—knowledge

formation; lived practice; movement within a spatial milieu—as an object of study in order to collate “differentiated subject-positions” (PSD 58) and detail “their clusters and relations” (PSD 55). As these subjects constitute themselves through a reticulate maze of shifts and displacements, they inevitably fall within, says Kendall Phillips, “the purview of rhetoric” and its canon of invention (341). Part and parcel of rhetorical constitution, Foucault’s account of subjectification maps the process by which one becomes rhetorically capacitated.

With Foucault in mind, this study multiplies revolutionary *Cubanidad* – the self-imaginary of Cubans as revolutionary subjects—by clustering its differently capacitated rhetorical ensembles. I do so by reading the statements of contemporary Cubans against historical claims and the contemporary constraints of material life on the island. To relegate these speakers to the position of fearful subjects whose identities have evaporated under the searing heat of a totalitarian regime would, I believe, further what Michelle Smith calls “containment rhetoric” or a rhetoric that reimagines unfamiliar discourse through one’s own interpretive framework (129). Smith emphasizes three overlapping hallmarks of such rhetoric: it presents the community as frozen in time; it views the community as unsustainable within the contemporary context; and, it describes the community’s life as requiring “unthinkable sacrifice” (131). Most of the relatively sparse discourse on Cuba that circulates in the U.S. fits this rubric as we imagine Cuba through the 1950s aesthetic of vintage Chevrolets and cabaret dancers, position its socialist values at odds with the larger global economy, and assume its citizens sacrifice themselves to the Castro regime. Opposed to this containment rhetoric that “reinforces the values of the imaginers and prevents consideration of other points of view,” this study refuses to assume that ideological or repressive state apparatuses direct the narratives of its informants even as it acknowledges the impossibility of transparent communication (143).<sup>3</sup>

The choice to let the speaker’s statements go unchallenged seeks to open the discursive field and, subsequently, the terrain of public policy. To interpret the discourse of the Cubans interviewed for this project as derivative of official doctrine serves, in Rob Asen’s words, a “doubly disabling tendency” (360). It excludes a group’s account of their own experience and misrepresents that experience as something else—self-sacrifice, ideology, or coercion. Moreover, it allows dominant perspective to “constitute a cumulative imaginary field that constrains the choices of successive participants” (362). For instance, the images of *balseros*—those fleeing Cuba on homemade rafts during the aptly named Special Period of the early 1990s—bolstered claims of vast anti-Castro sentiment and helped secure legislation that increased the scope of the U.S. embargo against Cuba.<sup>4</sup> The 1992 Cuban Democracy Act and the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democracy Solidarity Act, which prevented foreign nations that wished to trade with the United States from also trading with Cuba, isolated the island from much-needed resources at precisely the moment when it no longer could rely on the Soviet Union and

---

<sup>3</sup> This stereotypical Cuba is captured in films like *The Godfather II* and *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* and kept alive in a recent episode of *Keeping Up with The Kardashians* (season 12; episode 12).

<sup>4</sup> The “Special Period”, as Castro labeled it in 1990, has become a euphemism for the extreme economic depression that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only did Cuba lose its largest trading partner, it lost the ability to trade without a convertible foreign currency, resulting in a virtual inability to import goods. The 1990s produced enormous changes in Cuba—the introduction first of a dollar market and later a convertible Cuban peso; the opening of an international tourist industry; and the emergence of small business practices like renting rooms or running a restaurant out of one’s home—all designed to alleviate the dramatic reversal in Cuba’s quality of life that resulted from the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

its trading partners. Intended to be the last nail in the coffin of a communist Cuba, these sanctions starved an economically desperate population that had no intention of turning against its communist state. The dominant imaginary that interpreted those who took to the sea on make-ship boats as ideological compatriots critical of Castro's communism prevented the complexity of this economic situation from entering public debate. Whereas rewriting contemporary Cuban experience from the perspective of its earliest exiles deprives those currently on the island of narrating the experience of their own self-constitution, positioning these speakers as self-fashioning subjects paves the way for understanding *Cubanidad* as a heterodox rhetorical invention that cannot be contained within the binary diagram of power and resistance.

In order to understand this island identity quarantined from U.S. visitors and foreign to our dominant imaginations, I solicited Cuban nationals to conduct interview on my behalf. In partnership with faculty and students from the University of Havana's Facultad de Lenguas Extranjeras (FLEX), I worked closely with three Cubans who, in their mid-twenties, were in the final stages of their 5-year undergraduate degree in foreign languages. I came to know these individuals, their faculty advisors, and families over the course of three separate trips to Havana and many email conversations. By the spring of 2010, each student completed interviews with nine individuals across generational, racial, and gender lines for a total of 27 separate conversations.<sup>5</sup> They interviewed subjects who they either knew personally or through a third party. Interviews generally took place in the subject's home, though occasionally they were conducted in public settings and on the rare occasion in one's workplace. The names of interview subjects were not recorded and only minimal demographic information was used to identify each speaker. There were two incidents wherein a participant declined to expand on a response because of its personal (and likely controversial) nature. On one of these occasions, the tape recorder was turned off in order for a conversation to continue candidly. These incidents indicate that public discourse remained, in 2010, a fraught space. Nonetheless, as voluntary conversations with a fellow Cuban, the perspectives offered likely represent part of a complex truth.

Using this interview data, the next two sections redraw the relationship between the foundational revolutionary discourse and its contemporary variations; they do so with the intention of fragmenting the linear path between the two and replacing it with a multidimensional web-like diagram. In step with Cuban scholar Aída Beaupied, I track the revolutionary discourse and its efforts "to create a new kind of citizen—'el hombre nuevo'"—through its highly valorized authorship in José Martí and Che Guevara (131). Departing from Beaupied, who views this discourse as a straightjacket that deprives contemporary citizens of their imaginary powers, I view this discourse as a tool through which Cubans actively constitute themselves and their rhetorical capacities (134). Avoiding the cause and effect *topos* so often imposed on the relationship between early *patria o muerte* (fatherland or death) discourse and its twenty-first century modality, this rhetorical mapping attempts to understand *Cubanidad* as the invention of diversified identities in relationship to, but not dependent on, a national community, its state formation, and their collective discourse.

---

<sup>5</sup> The interviews were translated from Spanish into English by Iker Arranz, a faculty member at UC Santa Barbara's Department of Spanish and Portuguese.

## Revolutionary Discourse and the Formation of a New Cuban Identity

The Cuban Revolution, nearly synonymous with Fidel Castro in the North American imaginary, has a much longer history scripted into the Cuban imaginary. Its origins begin in 1868 when Carlos Manuel de Céspedes led a rebel army determined to overthrow Spanish colonial rule. This Ten Year War was followed by the Little War (1879-80) and later the War of Independence (1895-98) that finally displaced Spain. Cuban independence, however, was qualified by its neocolonial relationship to the United States. The Platt Amendment to the 1901 Cuban Constitution authorized U.S. military intervention, ceded Guantanamo Bay, and provided privileged economic status for U.S. businesses. Taking advantage of these conditions, U.S. companies quickly reconstructed the war ravaged island in their own economic interests. At the time of Castro's revolution, U.S. companies owned 40 per cent of the island's sugar plantations, 80 per cent of Cuban utilities, 90 per cent of its mines, and practically all oil industries and cattle ranches (Escalante 10). Additionally, they supplied commercial and retail goods at a markup of as much as 200 percent and financed the majority of Cuban loans (Pérez 453). It is in this context that Cubans view the revolution that began with the attack on the Moncada Barracks in 1953 and culminated with the ousting of President Batista on January 1, 1959, as the continuation of an ongoing movement toward national sovereignty.

A century of struggle to free itself from Spanish and U.S. colonialism fueled the revolution with an unprecedented sense of legitimacy and allowed it to dramatically reconstruct the Cuban experience. Under the guidance of Fidel Castro, the new government eliminated American thanksgiving, replaced Christmas with Three Kings Day, rewrote Cuban history as the ongoing struggle for independence, redistributed large-scale ranches to local farmers, and implored the public to buy Cuban goods. Castro explained, in an April 9, 1959, edition of *Revolución* that these efforts aimed at "Cubanizing Cuba" (qtd. in Pérez 482-3). Cuban identity, compromised by centuries of external influence, had to be re-cultivated by planting new seeds. To that end, Castro's government extended its social projects into the public landscape. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, it repurposed buildings, erected monuments, and maintained the revolutionary project within the felt experiences of its citizens. For instance, the Presidential Palace became the Museum of Revolution that, in addition to housing historical artifacts, displayed the secret route by which Batista fled to safety as well as the bullet holes from rebel guns that littered the marble entryway, making armed struggle perpetually coextensive with the new viewing public.

Moreover, as Thomas Dalton documents, a range of socio-political experiments helped transform previously colonized capitalist subjects into sovereign socialist subjects.<sup>6</sup> Because the Cuban leadership believed the material sacrifices of its military campaign transformed those involved, it explicitly sought "innovative ways to involve youth in comparable experiences" (Dalton 30). Within months of the revolution, *Cine Móvil* (Mobile Cinema) brought films to the rural countryside and pledged to democratize the big screen experience. It filmed its efforts and distributed the documentary *Por Primera Vez* (*For the First Time*), promoting its success and

---

<sup>6</sup> Dalton is among a group of scholars who interpret these practices using Foucault's disciplinary power. See also Calum McNeal, José Quiroga, and Stephen Wilkinson. For a discussion of Foucault's reception in the Cuban context as well as his relationship to Che Guevara's theorization of the new man, see Sam Binkley and Jorge Capetillo-Ponce's two companion articles.

highlighting revolutionary solidarity. In 1961, students were recruited into the literacy campaign as part of the so-called Year of Education. These young *brigadistas* lived, labored, and ate with families who, at night, under the light of a state distributed Coleman lamp, became their students. A family that achieved full literacy raised a flag over its house to signify the accomplishment; and, although these flags withered, the National Literacy Museum preserved the campaign's achievements as did Octavio Cortázar's award-winning *El Brigadista (The Teacher)*. These multifaceted efforts to construct Cuba's revolutionary identity did not originate from the desk of Fidel Castro as much as from a desire to reinvigorate a subjective aesthetic that takes its inspiration from national heroes like José Martí who much earlier addressed the need to Cubanize Cuba.

Born in Havana in 1853, Martí was only fifteen at the start of the Ten Years War. Too young to join the resistance, he nevertheless published a pro-revolutionary poem that resulted first in his imprisonment and later in his exile. During his banishment to Spain (1871-74), Martí attended university and honed his writing skills. He returned to the Americas, spending time in Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, and Cuba, before landing in New York City where he spent nearly fifteen years. In 1895 he returned to Cuba and died fighting for its independence. During his time in the United States he wrote for the *New York Sun* and freelanced for several Spanish language publications. In the former, he spoke eloquently about English language authors and U.S. culture; in the latter, he developed a sharp critique of the political, economic, and cultural exploitation of populations across the Americas. Throughout his extensive writings, Martí fostered a three-pronged program that resonates dramatically with Foucault's understanding of discourse as the articulation among subjectification, knowledge formation, and apparatuses of power. Specifically, he calls for experiential reconstitution of individuals, reflective study of the American situation, and continuous revolution as the means to instill and maintain an independent identity in Cuba and elsewhere.

Although he lived in urban centers, Martí understood that American exploitation took place in the agricultural countryside as much as in the city. Revolution could not succeed without the integration of these two, often antagonistic, spheres and their attendant identities into a single subjectivity. For Martí, "wrongs must be abhorred whether or not they are ours" (TUS 51). To achieve this collective identity individuals must awaken to the Other within themselves through their own lived experiences. As he says,

one must suffer, starve, work, love, and study, even in vain, but with one's own individual courage and freedom. One must keep watch with the poor, weep with the destitute, abhor the brutality of wealth, live in both mansion and tenement, in the school's reception hall and in its vestibule, in the gilt and jasper theater box, and in the cold bare wings. In this way a man can form opinions, with glimmers of reason. (TUS 52)

Not only does political reason require representation from all citizens—and "not the reason of the university over the reason of the province"—it also requires those citizens to have a breadth of experiences (OA 145). Martí valorizes the experiential embodiment of a multi-perspectival knowledge as foundational to reasoned deliberation and the building of a new American nation. He understands implicitly that ideology does not complete the identification process, which

includes a capillary power that habituates knowledge in the flesh and not just in one's consciousness.

A theorist of the American experience, Martí believed it imperative to study indigenous culture in order to match a nation's politics with those it governs. A situated art, politics should not be imposed from the outside but emerge organically from a particular place and people. "Our America," the term he used to describe what we now call "Latin America," illustrates this philosophy by advocating that independent American states forge new political structures according to their own historical and culture experiences. He asserts that "to be a governor of a new country means to be a creator" and that such inventiveness can be collectively mobilized through the literate public sphere (OA 142). "Newspapers, universities, and schools should foment the study of their country's dynamic factors" and education should be refocused from the colonizer to the indigenous: "the history of America, from the Incas to the present, must be taught until it is known by heart" (OA 142-3). Rather than import and adapt other models, Americans should invent entirely new political economic projects shaped by the contours of their history and culture. An appreciation of one's unique cultural textures fosters the spirit of political innovation and experimentation.

This indigenous spirit must be pegged to an ongoing revolutionary identity so as to constantly augment and improve a collective national identity. One way to do this, Martí asserted, is to animate the driving force of past revolutionaries within the ongoing landscape of political creation and recreation as the memorialization of historical figures keeps their transformative energy surging through future generations. He advised readers to imagine Simón Bolívar, for instance, as active in America, "still wearing his campaign boots, because what he did not complete has yet to be accomplished" (SB 156). Bolívar should be ever present so that, Martí reasoned, the contemporary Cuban can further his important work.<sup>7</sup> Revolution requires perpetual renewal and constant innovation, a process that links historical progress and subjectivity in an ongoing drive toward an improved future. Such identity cannot be passively consumed; it must be invented vis-à-vis embodied experience, intellectual engagement, and continuous adaptation. This identity is neither the imposition of a revolutionary government nor simply the spontaneous action of grass-roots revolutionaries, but a much less romantic subjectivity actively forged through the everyday invention of oneself within the changing contemporary scene.

It is precisely this admonishment to unite, innovate, and create something new through one's own experience that underscores so much of Che Guevara's efforts in the early years of the Cuban revolution. For Guevara, people transform themselves into revolutionary subjects through their experience. He claims to have witnessed such a change among the guerillas who fought in the Sierra Maestras and developed relationships with the residents of its remote mountain villages. Those peasants fed the revolutionaries who, to their surprise, paid for what they consumed; in turn, the revolutionaries provided literacy training and health care. Through these

---

<sup>7</sup> Although today Bolívar's name designates a main Havana thoroughfare, Martí has become the sign of perpetual revolution. Calling him "the apostle of our independence" (HJM 211), Guevara admonished Cuban's to follow his example and make Martí should be "ever-present in Cuba's life" (HJM 212). His image is reproduced throughout the city and is especially prominent at the José Martí memorial in the heart the Plaza de la Revolución.

everyday activities, punctuated by the more dramatic experience of putting one's life on the line, a new individual emerged. In Guevara's words,

the men who arrived in Havana after two years of arduous struggle ... are not the same ideologically as the ones who landed on the beaches of Las Coloradas or who joined in the first phase of the struggle. Their distrust of the peasant has turned into affection and respect for his virtues. Their total ignorance of life in the countryside has turned into a profound knowledge of the needs of our peasants. Their dabbling with statistics and with theory has been replaced by the firm cement of practice. (ICR 31)

Guevara, like Martí, identifies the physical experience of hardship, risk, and solidarity as crucial to the creation of a new Cuban identity.<sup>8</sup> In addition to theorizing revolution, one has to take up a revolutionary lifestyle in order to acquire such an identity.

If the revolutionary forces changed through these experiences, Guevara conjectured that others could be born into a new revolutionary subjectivity through similar experiences. He named this effort the making of the "new man" and outlined its method in his famous essay, "Socialism and Man in Cuba." As he saw it, the spirit of Cuban solidarity erupted spontaneously, but as the novelty of an independent Cuba wore off and the work of nation-building wore on, divisions re-emerged. In this context, the government needed to facilitate a revolutionary "attitude in daily life" (SMC 150). Conceiving the individual as "an unfinished product," the government designed experiences intended to produce a collective revolutionary vision (SMC 153). These manufactured activities aimed at what Guevara called "rebirth" (SMC 159). According to his theory, the individual forged through the capitalist world must cease to exist and a new individual must be born.

Volunteering to work in such areas as the literacy campaign, *escuela al campo*, *cine móvil*, or the rural health projects offered avenues toward this revolutionary rebirth.<sup>9</sup> Geared toward the university-educated professional class, these government initiatives had explicit and implicit goals. In addition to education, production, and health benefits, they forged the new Cuban subjectivity. University students could study political economic theory and verse themselves in revolutionary history, but they would not completely transform themselves without new experiences—ones that physically challenged participants at the same time they fostered familial-like bonds between the volunteers and the rural Cubans. Echoing Martí, Guevara says that "the university cannot be an ivory tower, far from society, removed from the practical

---

<sup>8</sup> This is not the first time that Guevara remarked on a total transformation of subjectivity. His *The Motorcycle Diaries* tells us that after seven months of traveling in the remote areas of South America and meeting its various indigenous populations, Guevara returned home a changed man: "the person who wrote these notes died the day he stepped back on Argentine soil. The person who is reorganizing and polishing them, me, is no longer me, at least I'm not the me I was" (12).

<sup>9</sup> Kozol's book-length discussion of the literacy campaign explores *escuela al campo* in detail. For instance, his interview with Jose Ramón Fernández, the Education Minister explains that the project, which seeks to break down the country-city divide, is inspired by José Martí. See Kozol's *Children of the Revolution*. For a contemporary analysis of the much deteriorated program, see Denise Blum's "Socialist Consciousness Raising." To understand the importance of early film projects, see Julio García Espinosa's "For an Imperfect Cinema" and for an explanation of how new media has taken up the democratization of film in the era of its institutional entrenchment, see Diana Coryat's "Historicizing *Cine Jóven*." For a discussion of the contemporary impacts of the rural health initiatives, see Marina Gold's "Healing Practices and Revolution in Socialist Cuba."

accomplishments of the Revolution” (RUR 206). He advises university students to “get in touch with the people. Go to the masses, but do not go with airs of superiority; go to the people as a revolutionary” (RUR 207-8). There is no intellectual substitute for organized revolutionary activities. Not only do they reveal the nation’s concrete realities, they also break down the divide between rural and urban Cubans, replacing it with all-encompassing socialist identity. With this newly forged personhood, Cubans, Guevara believed, become capable of engaging ideas and enacting possibilities that were previously unimaginable.

Several organized projects illustrate how this classic divide between the rural and urban populations was bridged by a rebirth of its citizens. Perhaps the most celebrated among them, the 1961 campaign achieved nearly full national literacy and profoundly changed its young urban volunteers. Although many of its instructors were not yet university-aged, they represented a privileged, urban youth who had little or no experience with the rural life they encountered. Everything about the experience—from the housing and the food to the long hours of physical labor—stood in stark contrast with their own lives. For many volunteers, the experience left an indelible mark on their sense of *Cubanidad*. As one former tutor explained, “those months, for me, were like the stories I have heard about conversion to a new religion. It was, for me, the dying of an old life and the start of something absolutely new” (Kozol, “A New Look” 348-9). According to Jonathon Kozol, this tutor was not exceptional. The campaign, he argues, “was a moment of political and moral transformation for large numbers of young people who had never before been outside of the small, comfortable circle of their homes” (349). One after another of his informants recalled the experience as life-changing. The inhabitation of such a foreign terrain enabled these young teachers to understand what they could not before and helped their students transform from subjects in need of assistance to members of an extended family.

The less well-known, but no less important, *cine móvil* campaign equally sought such transformation. The project relied on “a team of volunteer projectionists who serviced the most remote parts of the island by way of trucks, mules, and even fishing boats in order to bring films to Cubans who had little access to the cinema” (Balaisis 32). Under the guidance of the *Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC), the goal of this project was to spread revolutionary ideology as well as to alleviate the divide among urban and rural Cubans. Founded within months of the revolution, ICAIC viewed film generally and *cine móvil* in particular as a means to deepen “the revolutionary spirit and to feed its creative inspiration” (Chanan 20). Reaching over two million viewers, its screenings included pro-revolutionary newsreels and instructional films as well as popular U.S. productions such as *Citizen Kane* and *Modern Times*. As Ron Greene has argued in a different context, films exhibit an “attraction effect” that brings diverse people together within a shared space and time (26). From Greene’s perspective, film content, which during the Cuban campaign included such ideologically suspect narratives as *Singing in the Rain*, takes a backseat to its ability to unite diverse populations through common experience. In addition to sponsoring this project, ICAIC produced films like the Soviet sponsored *Soy Cuba*, which dramatizes the desired rebirth of a new Cuban identity. Set mid-revolution, the film toggles among several protagonists—a prostitute, a university activist, and a guerrilla fighter—whose narratives intersect as each individual acquires a new Cuban subjectivity. The film represents this transformed identity as the spirit of Fidel Castro in all Cubans. In its final scene, a small group of guerrilla fighters are asked, “where is Fidel,” to

which each responds, “I am Fidel.”<sup>10</sup> Reconstituting a divided Cuban landscape within a singular plane of identification, *Soy Cuba* frames *Cubanidad* as an embodied filiation. Castro’s revolutionary enthusiasm defines the very existence of anyone taking up the cause of Cuban sovereignty.

Rather than being imposed in a top-down fashion, the practice of defining oneself as entangled with Fidel Castro reflects his profound ability to enlist others in support of his revolutionary vision. As one biographer attests, Castro possessed an innate ability to connect with and reshape individual identities (Szulc). A master rhetor, Castro understood and connected with his audiences.<sup>11</sup> Guevara explains this fusion as “the dialogue of tuning forks whose vibrations interact, producing new sounds” (SMC 152). This person-to-person alignment dissolves individual boundaries and enables one’s energy to pass directly to another. Although such affective transmission eludes direct control, Guevara recognized its importance and tried to funnel its spontaneous charge through what he called emulation. Emulation, he speculated, could enable a special cadre to mediate between the masses and the governing party. Made up of highly dynamic individuals, the cadre is able to sense and orient the energy of the masses by reinforcing the revolution’s importance with their everyday behavior. Such a subject “must make his enthusiasm contagious to all the other compeñeros, and see to it that his individual effort is transformed into a great, united, collective effort of all the workers” (MDS 83). Acting as a party surrogate, this subject fuels an unregulated exponential expansion of revolutionary motivation throughout the island and does so in an entirely unofficial capacity.

As I have tried to illustrate, early revolutionary discourse directed re-education projects, but also inspired Cubans to reimagine and reanimate the revolution according to evolving historical exigencies. Listening to contemporary informants, the next section explores the tensions among the Cuban population as they accept, adapt, and refuse this invitation. It presents various themes—on topics as diverse as Cuban freedom, economic struggle, and revolutionary propaganda—that emerged from one-on-one conversations with 27 different Cubans recorded in 2010. Offered without identifying features so as to ensure anonymity, these conversations reflect shared experiences and an embodied filiation to the island and its history, indicating a coherent, though uneven, sense of Cuban identity. Traces of the revolutionary discourse articulated by Martí and Guevara (and kept alive in both school curriculum and island iconography) are visible. Neither repetitions nor reversals, these traces constitute shifts, displacements, and revisions appropriate to the heterogeneous needs of contemporary Cubans.

---

<sup>10</sup> Directed by a Soviet filmmaker Mikhail Kalatozov, the film did not find a welcome audience among Cubans. Yet it was re-released in the 1990s and heralded for its stylistic techniques. For an excellent reading of this film, see Amit Thakkar’s “Who Is Cuba?”

<sup>11</sup> Many cite Castro’s leadership and rhetorical prowess as crucial to Cuba’s success. In the early days of the revolution, he held audiences captivated by speeches that sometimes lasted eight hours and often reached a speed of 300 words a minute (Pérez 487). Historian Antoni Kapcia stresses this “electrifying speech-making” and Castro’s “capacity to persuade those around him and the public at large” (181) while political economist Damion Fernandez emphasizes the emotional connection people felt to him: “people flocked to see, hear, and touch the young hero, Fidel” (64).

## Revolutionary *Cubanidad* in the Words of Contemporary Cubans

Most participants placed freedom at the heart of a collective Cuban identity. Whereas Americans generally conceive freedom negatively—freedom from government interference, for instance—these Cubans imagine freedom positively as the ability to live and fight as a revolutionary subject. National freedom ensures that no external power delimits the collective potential of Cubans. One young man expressed this directly, saying “being Cuban means being free.” An older man defined *Cubanidad* as the “freedom to fight and achieve everything one can” and another of the same generation stated that “we live in a free country, sovereign, where every Cuban has the same right to life.” For him, Cuban history began with Céspedes and continues to evolve through what he, like so many others, understands as the “the triumph of the Cuban revolution that is present here.” According to one young man, this freedom guarantees “the equality in conditions between the beings of this country—free access to health, sports, all the benefits that this nation offers.” Equality of opportunity is reiterated across generations and gender, with women especially emphasizing the sacrifices made by revolutionary leaders to produce this free playing field. An older woman explains that many revolutionary leaders “were rich and they gave up everything to give it to us,” while a younger woman stresses that “they did a lot for freedom in our country, for us to be free and have a right to choose what we want for our lives.” One man, who was a teenager when Castro’s army marched into Havana, defines Cuban freedom as the broadening of opportunities. He says, “I am a carpenter and I don’t regret being a carpenter. But, what I can say is that the current young people have the freedom to be what they want, as long as they follow the rules.”<sup>12</sup> Even though adamant that the younger generation has it better than he did, this man understands that there are limits to Cuban freedom.

Freedom, as explained by these Cubans, loses its traction as the scale narrows from national to local issues. One devout Christian qualifies the “great freedom in our country,” conceding that one cannot “propose an idea that you have in the newspapers.” Freedom of speech, he says, “has to be under control” and “if you go over that limit and start talking and criticizing things that you think are wrong and they get it wrong, you can get into trouble. We live like this in this country. It’s been 50 years like this and it is not just me saying this, everybody in Cuba knows it.” A university student adds that “many things have happened that newspapers don’t report.” For instance, he says that he witnessed anti-government posters during periods of electrical blackouts that never received media attention. Another student registers the same concern by questioning why Cubans cannot legally access free satellite television or why one man’s questions, directed to long-term statesman Ricardo Alarcón, about the need to increase dialogue between the public and the government, were never reported even though it was discussed “all over the country” through “informal media like, for example, passing emails.”<sup>13</sup> Although it may be tempting to interpret comments like these as calls for a free market press, such a reading reflects U.S. experience more than Cuban. Because these speakers clearly pride themselves on the freedom to advance Cuban socialism, their concerns about the limitations imposed on free speech are better characterized as calls for an improved

---

<sup>12</sup> This characterization of freedom parallels Castro’s often quoted 1961 “Words to Intellectuals.” Castro argues that the revolutionary agenda should take priority for all artistic and intellectual production. As he frames it, “within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, there are no rights” (221).

<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this incident with Alarcón, see the epilogue to Amelia Rosenberg Weinreb’s *Cuba in the Shadow of Change*.

revolutionary praxis. Situated in this way, struggling to evolve a responsive national media and an increased space for free speech reflects a permutation on the reoccurring theme of Cuban resistance as a revolutionary ethic.

Inseparable from daily life, revolutionary struggle sits adjacent to freedom as one of the twin pillars of Cuban identity. As a male in his mid-thirties puts it, to be Cuban means “to be a revolutionary.” This identity manifests as a two-sided coin—the first defensive and the second creative. The defensive side takes the form of withstanding external attacks. Thus, an older man says he feels most Cuban “whenever they want to attack us with the blockade and this or that, whenever they want to defeat the government we have.” This same sentiment is expressed by a middle-aged woman who asserts that “the Cuban is made to resist.” Resistance, says another woman, is “in our character, in our blood.” An eight-year-old at the time of the revolution, she claims to have felt the revolution in her “flesh” and believes “Cubans have their nationality deep in their bones.” One man traces this revolutionary formation to his experience in utero:

My mom told me that I was born at the same time as the Moncada and that she went out to protest with me in her belly and ready to give birth, and they took part in a demonstration that was conducted to release some of the them, the ones at the Isla de Piños. I think that gives you an idea of what kind of blood runs through the veins of my people... I was taught that one can never give up.<sup>14</sup>

Cubans who feel this revolutionary sensibility coursing through their veins conquer any hurdle that comes their way. There exists, explains one man, a “feeling that has been rooted in us after more than fifty years involved in a revolution, [and this] makes us think of ourselves as special citizens.” He goes on to say “that we have a special identity because we committed ourselves to a social system, to a political system, to a way of living that is so different from other ones around the world... and to be Cuban means to be resistant, to be audacious, to adapt yourself.” On the one hand, Cubans struggle against threats to their hard-earned socialist government; and, on the other hand, they struggle against imperfections of that freely chosen government. Cubans are not simply subject to revolutionary discourse that must be enacted or resisted, but self-constituting subjects entangled within a revolutionary production that will always emerge as a variation on an ongoing theme.

Notwithstanding this deep investment in revolutionary struggle, often described as a literal part of Cuban bodies, one middle-aged woman admits that such identification with the communist experiment does not apply to everyone. Some entirely exceed the relatively broad bandwidth of revolutionary identity. Many contemporary Cubans, she says, have been so devastated by the Special Period that it has dampened the spark of their revolutionary spirit. Contrary to the idea of a special Cuban bloodline, she acknowledges that “not everybody has the ‘resist without giving up’ thing.” Faced with what seem like unending obstacles, many choose the path of negotiation. As another describes it, “We have figured out gradually what we have to do and what we do not have to do.” No power, even a disciplinary one animating the very pulse of its citizens, holds a complete monopoly. Whereas U.S. audiences often image Cubans

---

<sup>14</sup> On July 26, 1956, Fidel Castro and other young revolutionaries attacked the Moncada Barracks. Several rebels, including Castro, were imprisoned on the Isla de Piños, which has been renamed Isla de Jovenes or the Island of Youth.

surrendering themselves to an oppressive government for fear of being labeled a *gusano*, both historical and contemporary Cubans allow for a population of non-revolutionaries. Along with his seemingly endless enthusiasm for building a new Cuban subjectivity, Guevara accepted without explicit condemnation the reality of a “minority that for one reason or another does not participate in the building of socialism” (SMC 157). Lacking a deep identification with the revolutionary project and unable to endure the economic hardships of an island nation disenfranchised from the global community, these Cubans gravitate to the periphery of society or migrate to other countries. The watchwords for this group are acquiescence and emigration rather than struggle and creation.<sup>15</sup>

Those resistant citizens notwithstanding, the Cubans interviewed tackled the Special Period through characteristically Cuban ingenuity and inventiveness. According to them, the political and economic turmoil of the 1990s represented another moment to display national loyalty by persevering in the face of grave economic scarcity. As one informant maintains, the Special Period, “for the great majority of us, was an opportunity to love your country even more, to face each and every difficulty, to find an alternative.” Another explains that Cubans responded creatively: “we learned how to invent many things.” Almost everyone shared a story to illustrate such invention. For instance, one woman, who was a young girl during the Special Period, recalls the “little school shoes” that her mother pieced together from spare fabric; “I will never forget them,” she says. Additionally, she remembers her “mom trying to wash with maguey leaves... because there was no soap” and cooking outside because there was no gas for the oven. She describes the Special Period as a “great school for Cuban people. It more than proved that we can survive anything. Cuban people got stronger in the face of difficulties and created their own methods.” Another woman of the same age supports this claim, explaining that her mother sewed clothing in exchange for food. A third tells the story of her daughter who was enrolled in university and although there was no tuition, there was also no money for the long commute. So, she “started to cook homemade sweets and sell them” to cover the extra costs. The post-Soviet era was so difficult it coaxed otherwise law-abiding citizens into maneuvering the system or what one young man calls “monkey business.” These activities, he says, are widely tolerated because everyone knows that “one can’t make it with our wages.” Practices as apparently benign as accepting tips from tourists, absconding from the factory with a few cigars to sell on the black market, or serving lobster (a banded item) at a licensed *paladar* are all subsumed under the concept of revolutionary struggle and not explicitly linked to an individual entrepreneurial drive.

Indeed, the incorporation of unauthorized activities into the revolutionary identity indicates the overwhelming success of Cuba’s subject formation, a process that evolves through embodied connection to the revolutionary project and its leadership. Revelatory of the process Guevara called emulation and Martí stipulated as the unfinished work of revolution, the strong sentiments many of these individuals express toward Fidel Castro, for instance, comes across as spontaneous and deeply felt. Thoroughly integrated into Cuban experience, this identification allows one young man to assert emphatically that “thanks to Fidel I am what I am right now.” An

---

<sup>15</sup> These non-conformists have been supported by an informal remittance economy and the possibility of being fast-tracked into U.S. citizenship through the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act. On the growth and importance of Cuba’s remittance economy, see the articles housed by Florida International University’s Cuban Research Institute (<https://cri.fiu.edu/cuban-america/remittance/>). For a discussion of emigration, see Silvia Pedraza’s *Political Disaffection in Cuba’s Revolution and Exodus*.

older man characterizes Fidel as “the most talented man in the world” and a middle-aged woman identifies that talent as the power of his speech, saying “he hypnotizes you. He was and always will be my leader.” Some explain it more affectionately: “we love our Commander-in-Chief.” Another Fidelista confesses that “I love Fidel, I adore him... because I am black, Latina, and poor.” She does not elaborate on how this positionality connects her with Fidel, indicating the obviousness of the extent to which Castro’s government improved the lives of Cuba’s most vulnerable citizens.

According to the majority of those interviewed, Fidel and other revolutionaries have been kept present in the lived experience of Cubans as a way to transmit revolutionary zeal. One woman says the images of these revolutionaries are “really important because physically they can no longer be with us, [but] their presence is there in busts, in images.” Like Martí and Guevara, this woman understands the significance of maintaining a continuous revolutionary spirit and, for her, this is the purpose of the built environment. Through revolutionary iconography, she explains, “one can feel what they gave for all of us so we could be better, freer, more revolutionary.” As one *vieja* explains, the revolutionary potential of those men moves through images and inspires a new generation of Cubans. She says, “they are our martyrs, who gave their lives away, many of them really young ones, the majority young ones, so we could have what we have here. That is what must be transmitted to the generation so the patriotic fervor for our nationality, for our identity, to be transmitted from one generation to another.” A young woman similarly stresses the collective energy contained within revolutionary memorials: “Those images don’t represent persons. Those images represent a nation. They represent a nation because Raul and Fidel are not persons; Fidel and Raul are a nation.” With the exception of one man’s strong response to Raul (he calls him “a thug”) no one responds negatively to the Cuban leadership nor to its visual celebration conspicuously displayed throughout the schools, museums, theaters and streets of Cuba. To these individuals, such iconography is no more propaganda—a commonplace assertion among outsiders—than is the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, or Mount Rushmore.

Yet others say the ubiquitous imagery highlights a mismatch between the ongoing revolution and the contemporary situation. For one woman, the revolutionary monuments “don’t mean anything ... they are just there and I’m tired of looking at them.” Betraying similar weariness, one young man laments that “years ago it was something positive and would encourage the Cuban people, but what they do at this moment is create more disappointment because we mainly see these messages don’t match with reality.” For him, “it is as if they encourage us to do something that we know we must do, but the real conditions tell us that it is impossible to do.” For this reason, he conjectures that “the number of people who look at them and approve them is very low.” An older woman makes a similar point, saying that the revolution “cannot be only a motto, but must be realities. Improve the production, bring people more products, more food, better nutrition, housing, and more.” Viewing the revolution as a static ideological position, these critical voices call for improved Cuban experiences. To impose a rough division, those who approach memorials and other visual signs as ideology tend to be more critical of its presence while those who understand it as transmitting a subject-forming energy to the citizenry generally embrace it. At heart, both groups seek greater political advocacy

and economic justice—two processes that require an active and diverse civil society.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, Rafael Hernández, editor of Cuba's *Temas*, asserts that a thriving civil society exists within Cuba and, like its capitalist counterpart, is geared toward a more effective state.<sup>17</sup>

The interview participants reinforce his position through their wide-ranging civil society activities. As one young man says, “almost everyone participates in an organization.” He takes part in the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) and has “done some voluntary work on Sundays when we had to restore the neighborhood.” Another young man helped to organize “the campaign plan against Dengue.”<sup>18</sup> An even more active youth volunteers in “work mobilizations during the weekends—the cane, the cotton, coffee in the fields.” One older man has been “a mason for 45 years” and another works in “the cooperative. There, they give you all the materials and all you need so you can do the farming.” Such participation is not limited to men. A middle-aged woman says she joins “in the activities of my block, in the ones of the CDR, in the ones of the Federation, in the ones of the Union of my work center.” An older woman uses the Bible to explain the situation: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Instead of taxes and tithes, Cuban citizens often volunteer their time and offer their expertise to the state as well as to the Church. Far from prohibited, religious participation assumes a critical role in the daily lives of several of those interviewed. One woman explains that she brings “communion to ill people” and “I also teach catechism and participate in the school.” An older man says he takes on “leadership within the church and I am a Party militant, too.” For these individuals, political participation exists side-by-side with Church and other group memberships.

Of course, just as not everyone is made to struggle, not everyone participates in structured activities. Non-participants are either leery of organizations or simply do not see the benefit. One young man, for instance, says he doesn’t like to participate in organized groups, but that he contributes to society through his work as an electrician. He states, “I am not and never was interested in participating in any organization, whether political, religious, or cultural.” Similarly, an older woman characterizes herself as active in her work as well as her religious life, but not “active with regards to belonging to an organization.” Another participant asserts that she is not more civically engaged because although the government stresses local decision-making, she believes decisions actually stem from the more centralized federal government. According to these discussants, there exists neither pressure to join nor negative repercussions for not participating in the plethora of organized activities that serve as either an extension of or a check on the revolutionary government.

---

<sup>16</sup> Although those most censorious of Cuba condemn its lack of civil society, others cite robust discussion in such places as Yoani Sanchez’s Generation Y blog or films like Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s *Fresa y Chocolate* (1993), both of which critique the authoritarianism of the revolutionary government. Sanchez has a worldwide audience and has received prestigious international awards for her work, but she likely adds more to the conversation outside of Cuba than inside, owing primarily to the limited online accessibility for most Cubans. See, for instance, Stefani Vicari’s “Exploring the Cuban Blogosphere.”

<sup>17</sup> *Temas* exists online (<http://temas.cult.cu/>). See also *Looking at Cuba* for an overview of Hernández’s work.

<sup>18</sup> The mosquito-borne dengue virus is widespread in Cuba. The island sponsors clinics and advertising campaigns specifically designed to limit, if not eliminate, the virus. See Keith Bolender for a discussion of the claim that the United States introduced a particularly vicious form of the virus as part of a CIA-backed operation of biological warfare.

Although groups that critique or fill in for failed government initiatives abound, they do not seem to reflect a counter-revolutionary sentiment. As one middle-aged woman explains, “all of us would like to see improvement in our country,” but “the revolution is going to keep going forward with our rights and wrongs.” Deeply identified with the revolution, (she claims “it formed me as a human being”), she both acknowledges the material problems of Cuban society and denies that socialism is going to end. It’s “not even close,” she says. An older woman puts it more strongly, asserting that there could never be a counter-revolution. She is firm in her conviction that

people won’t permit that because here we can have 2000, 3000, 4000 sons of bitches that want to live their good lives and won’t give a fuck about the immense majority, but the immense majority knows and will not permit it. This would only have a backward effect, even if we sometimes complain because of the electricity, this or that.

A young woman, who at first reinforces this confidence, is not so certain. As she sees it, “this revolution is 50 years already and it will be 100 years old, I have no doubts, but, well, you never know.” Participants admit that “the future of this country is so uncertain,” but they do not look to a non-socialist state with the belief that it will solve that uncertainty. Indeed, one thirty-year-old man fears the possibility of such dramatic change: “I am afraid because we are not prepared—not materially or psychologically.” The most welcoming response to the possibility of a non-socialist governing structure comes from another male who concedes that “if this Revolution collapses and the Americans come to this country,” I will adapt because “if I have to do something else to survive, well, I will do it.” This is hardly the clarion call for capitalism that U.S. new sources lead us to believe lurks on the horizon. Even though these interviews were not conducted in an ideal setting, this reticence toward dramatic political economic change needs to be taken seriously. Without listening to those Cubans who live on the island, we will not be able to improve U.S.-Cuban dialogue and its attendant policies. With this in mind, I end with a call toward rhetorical diversification in our engagements with Cuba and its subjects.

### **Cuba and the Importance of an Enlarged Rhetorical Lens**

In an essay on his relationship to the Puerto Rican independence movement, Victor Villanueva recalls that his father often introduced him as “Fidel.” He says that this nickname was “a matter I took as ridicule when I was twenty-five and when I was fifty came to wonder whether it was intended to be honorific” (631). Exemplifying the ambiguity of discourse, this anecdote also highlights the thin knowledge most U.S. citizens have of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. In part, his uncertainty stems from a lack of information and even misinformation; another part, however, stems from his mode of rhetorical interpretation, one that equates difference with ridicule and attempts exclude it from dominant imaginary schemes. Staging a dialogue between early Cuban revolutionaries and contemporary citizens, this study suggests that a richer investigation into the Cuba’s revolutionary project can be forged through a Foucauldian lens that embraces identity as an embodied practice of constituting the self by engaging the tensions between identity and difference; self and other; local and global; past and future.

A Foucauldian discursive approach—one that allows Cubans to speak about and reflect on their own experiences and organizes these statements according to shifts and displacements

from official revolutionary discourse—enhances our rhetorical imagination of Cuba in several ways. First, it explores the production of the self beyond an imposed and totalizing identity. Specifically, it views Cuban subjectivity as crafted through self-conscious negations with ideological state apparatuses that have been evolving since their inception. According to Rachel Price, Cubans aim at a moving political target and thus “Cuba has always been changing” (10). In short, there is no standard against which to measure Cuban identity other than as a dynamic process of multiple engagements. Second, this evolving Cuban subjectivity destabilizes the hegemonic position of anti-Castro sentiment that circulates relatively unchallenged within both our popular and political spheres; in doing so, it opens up a more fragmented picture that toggles between inside and outside sensibilities as well as local and global policies. Third, this Foucauldian lens illuminates the importance of rhetoric’s ontological threads. Cuba’s revolutionary discourse not only cultivates an ideological doctrine that subjects must engage. It also, to borrow Foucault’s words, produces “the very body of the one who, by transcribing his readings, has appropriated them and made their truth his own” (*Ethics* 213). In other words, the Cuban subject is constituted in both thought and flesh or the consubstantial identity rhetorically cultivated through a multifaceted and material *Cubanidad*. This double nature, embodied as well as epistemological, allows diverse political economic practices to be absorbed within the lived experience of Cuban socialism without challenging its ideological tenants.

Although many scholars have followed Thomas Dalton’s lead to explore Cuban subjectivity through Foucault’s disciplinary lens, they have not addressed the embodied nature of Foucault’s subject formation. Writing at the height of the Special Period and prior to a host of structural changes, Dalton argued that the Cuban revolution’s intense effort to align the individual with the state lacked the oppositional space necessary for a more sustainable future. The solution, for him, was a more robust civil society, which he defined as “that sphere of social life involving the ‘spontaneous and voluntary exchange’ of resources, services, and other goods” (144). He surmised in 1993 that “the challenge that Cuban authorities face, then, is to create sufficient slack in the social order” to experiment and invent new solutions to their sociopolitical and economic problems (145). As I interpret it, the Cuban terrain forged since his analysis, a landscape discussed by the contemporary interlocutors interviewed for this article, reflects this slack. Those structural gaps have nurtured subjects with diverse bodily capacities, all of which are different than the dominant imaginations that so often delimit the Cuban experience. According to this reading, improved deliberation and policy debate require that we engage the multiple subjectivities of this *Cubanidad* rather than its purported ideology. These multiple subjectivities reflect an ongoing revolutionary frontier that has ousted Spain and the United States along with capitalism and the global economy. But, paradoxically, because these exclusionary acts are also foundational acts, there is not and never has been an isolated Cuba nor a hermetically sealed *Cubanidad*. Indeed, these boundary-making activities have produced a heterogeneous revolutionary identity that cannot be contained by political economic or national boundaries any more than it can be limited to an ideology. Written into the flesh, Cuban identity transcends the boundaries placed upon it precisely by practicing those boundaries in perpetually new and innovative ways.

## References

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971. 127-186.
- Asen, Robert. "Imagining in the Public Sphere" *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35.4 (2002): 345-367.
- Balaisis, Nicholas. "Cuba, Cinema and the Post-Revolutionary Public Sphere" *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 19.2 (Fall 2010): 26-42.
- Beaupied, Aída. "From Liberty to Fatherland: Sacrifice and Dead Certainties in the Critical Discourses of Cuba" *Foucault and Latin America* Ed. Benigno Trigo. New York: Routledge, 2002. 125-135.
- Binkley, Sam, and Jorge Capetillo-Ponce. "Foucault and the 'New Man': Conversations on Foucault in Cuba" *Rethinking Marxism* 20.3 (2008): 452-463.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Foucault, Marxism, and the Cuban Revolution: Historical and Contemporary Reflections." *Rethinking Marxism* 20.3 (2008): 437-451.
- Blum, Denise. "Socialist Consciousness Raising and Cuba's School to the Countryside Program" *Anthropology & Educational Quarterly* 39.2 (2008): 141-160.
- Bolender, Keith. *Cuba Under Siege: American Policy, the Revolution, and its People*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- Castro, Fidel. "Words to Intellectuals" *Fidel Castro Reader*. Ed. David Deutschmann. North Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2008. 213-239.
- Chanan, Michael. *The Cuban Image*. Bloomington: BFI Publishing, 1985.
- Corrigan, Lisa M. "After the Revolution: Cuban Women's Healing Practices and Knowledge Spaces." *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 11/12 (2008/2009): 103-131.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Writing Resistance and Heroism: Guerilla Strategies from Castro's Gulag." *Communication Quarterly* 39.1 (2011): 61-81.
- Coryat, Diana. "Historicizing *Cine Jóven* and Cuba's Audiovisual Landscape: New Paradigms in Digital Media Production and Circulation" *International Journal of communication* 9 (2015): 2326-2343.
- Dalton, Thomas C. *'Everything within the Revolution': Cuban Strategies for Social Development Since 1960.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.
- Escalante, Fabian. *The Cuba Project: CIA Covert Operations 1959-62*. New York: Ocean Press, 2004.
- Espinosa, Julio García. "For an Imperfect Cinema" *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Ed. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 458-465.
- Fernández, Damián. *Cuba and the Politics of Passion*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.
- Foucault, Michel. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Penguin, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*. New York: Vintage, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Politics and the Study of Discourse" *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Ed. Graham Burchell, Colon Gordon, and Peter Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. 53-72.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Psychiatric Power*. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Security, Territory, Population*. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2007.
- Gold, Marina. "Healing Practices and Revolution in Socialist Cuba" *Social Analysis* 58.2 (2014): 42-59.

- Greene, Ronald Walter. "Y Movies: Film and the Modernization of Pastoral Power"  
*Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2.1 (2005): 20-36.
- Guevara, Ernesto Che. "Honoring José Martí" *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*. Ed. Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdes. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969. 209-212.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Ideology of the Cuban Revolution." *Che Guevara Speaks*. New York: Pathfinder, 2000. 25-31.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "May Day Speech." *Che Guevara Speaks*. New York: Pathfinder, 2000. 82-88.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey around South America*. Trans. Ann Wright. New York: Verso, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Revolution and University Reform." *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*. Ed. Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdes. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969. 205-208.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Socialism and Man in Cuba" *Manifesto: Three Classic Essays on How to Change the World* New York: Ocean Press, 2005. 149-168.
- Hernández, Rafael. *Looking at Cuba: Essays on Culture and Civil Society*. Gainesville: University of Florida press, 2003.
- Kapcia, Antoni. *Cuba in Revolution: A History since the Fifties*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008.
- Kozol, Jonathan. *Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in the Cuban Schools*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba" *Harvard Educational Review* 48.3 (1978): 341-377.
- Lowry, Elizabeth. "The Flower of Cuba: Rhetoric, Representation, and Circulation at the Outbreak of the Spanish-American War." *Rhetoric Review* 32.2 (2013): 174-190.
- Martí, Jose. "Our America." *The America of José Martí: Selected Writings*. Trans. Juan de Onís. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1954. 138-151.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Simón Bolívar: Address before the Hispanic American Literary Society." *The America of José Martí: Selected Writings*. Trans. Juan de Onís. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1954. 152-162.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Truth about the United States." *Inside the Monster: Writings on the United States and American Imperialism*. Ed. Philip S. Foner. Trans. Elinor Randall. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975. 49-54.
- McNeal, Calum. "To Engage or Not To Engage: An (A)ffective Argument in Favor of a Policy of Engagement with Cuba" *Canadian Foreign Policy* 16.1 (2010): 155-173.
- Olson, J. Olson, and René Augustín De Los Santos. "Expanding the Idea of América." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45.3 (2015): 193-198.
- Pedraza, Silvia. *Political Disaffection in Cuba's Revolution and Exodus*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Pérez, Louis A. *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
- Phillips, Kendall. "Spaces of Invention: Dissension, Freedom, and Thought in Foucault"  
*Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35.4 (2002): 328-344.
- Price, Rachel. *Planet/Cuba: Art, Culture, and the Future of the Island*. London: Verso, 2015.
- Quiroga, José. *Cuban Palimpsests*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005.
- Romney, Abraham "Rhetoric from the Margins: Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiographia de un Esclavo*." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45.3 (2015): 237-249.
- Smith, Michelle. "Containment Rhetoric and the Public Sphere: Imaging Amana, Inscribing America" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40.2 (2010): 128-145.

- Soy Cuba*. Dir. Mikhail Kalatozov. Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, 1964.
- Stormer, Nathan and Bridie McGreavy. "Thinking Ecologically About Rhetoric's Ontology: Capacity, Vulnerability, and Resilience" *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 50.1 (2017): 1-25.
- Szulc, Tad. *Fidel: A Critical Portrait*. New York: Harper, 2000.
- Thakkar, Amit. "Who Is Cuba?: Dispersed Protagonism and Heteroglossia in *Soy Cuba/I Am Cuba*" *Frameworks* 55.1 (Spring 2014): 83-101.
- Vicari, Stefania. "Exploring the Cuban Blogosphere: Discourse Networks and Informal Politics." *New Media and Society* 17.9 (2014): 1492-1512.
- Villanueva, Victor. "Colonial Memory and the Crime of Rhetoric: Pedro Albizu Campos" *College English* 71.6 (2009): 630-638.
- Weinreb, Ameilia Rosenberg. *Cuba in the Shadow of Change: Daily Life in the Twilight of the Revolution*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009.
- Wilkinson, Stephen. "Ideology and Power in the Cuban State" *A Changing Cuba in a Changing World*. Ed. Mauricio A. Font. New York: Bildner Publications, 2008. 11-21.