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Cuba en cambio: Shifting Ideas of Cuban National Identity

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Cuba en cambio: Shifting Ideas of Cuban National Identity

For most people outside of Cuba, the island carries an air, and allure, of the unknown. Following Castro's 1959 socialist revolution, the country underwent a whirlwind transition from a small Caribbean nation with little international sway to the world's longest standing socialist experiment. As Cuba's unique political, economic, and cultural shifts forced the construction and reconstruction of its people's national identity, narratives from Cubans on and off the island portray these shifting conceptions of what it means to be Cuban, and how these various conceptions of national identity affect the relationship between Cubans around the world.

For years, the island's socialist revolution sealed off its borders from much of the outside world, splitting the Cuban people across ideological and physical borders. Those in support of the Revolution cited advances in healthcare, education, and wealth distribution, all of which resulted from reforms instituted by Castro's government. Historian Aviva Chomsky writes that "in the short space of six months, hundreds of thousands of Cubans developed an immediate and lasting stake in the success of the Revolution" (Chomsky, 40). On the other hand, 200,000 Cubans left the island between 1960 and 1962, primarily driven away by the ideological shifts brought with the new Cuban state (Chomsky, 75). During this time, exit visa requirements and restrictions on Cubans' travel severely limited interactions between Cubans on and off the island (Chomsky, 139; Chomsky, 79). The identity of the nation became polarized, with conflicting images created by the state, Cubans on the island, Cubans living in exile, and foreigners around the world.

As the revolutionary state became the heart of life on the island, it also became the unilateral power constructing and disseminating the image of Cuba's nation identity as one equivalent to that of the State and the Revolution. Art, cinema, and literature produced by the state's cultural institutions, such as the *Escuelas nacionales del arte* (ENA)¹, *Instituto cubano del arte e industria cinematográficos* (ICAIC)², and the *Unión nacional de escritores y artistas de Cuba* (UNEAC)³, tended to foment the unity of Cubans under the values of the Revolution as well as the history of the island and solidarity with prior revolutionary movements. These productions also served to alienate those 'outside' the Revolution – creating a rigid conceptualization of 'Cubanness.' In his famous 1961 speech "*Palabras a los intelectuales*,"⁴ Castro condemns those 'outside' the Revolution, claiming that "since the Revolution takes in the interests of the people and signifies the interests of the entire nation no one can rightfully claim a right against the Revolution [...] Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, no rights at all" (Castro, 9).

These social and ideological shifts that accompanied Castro's rise to power centered the Revolution and its values at the heart of Cuban national identity. This conception of Cuban national identity is similar to that described by scholar Fernando Ortiz pre-Revolution as *cubanidad*,⁵ which emphasizes one's belonging to the *país*, or country. Later, the concept of *cubanidad* is described in a post-Revolutionary context by

¹ In English, the National Schools for the Arts

² In English, the Cuban Institute of Cinematic Art and Industry

³ In English, the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists

⁴ "Words to Intellectuals"

⁵ Though the older analysis of *cubanidad* comes from Fernando Ortiz in his published lecture "*Los factores humanos de la cubanidad*," I follow Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's analysis of *cubanidad*, *cubanía*, and *cubaneo* in his article "A Willingness of the Heart: *Cubanidad*, *Cubanía*, and *Cubaneo*."

Gustavo Pérez-Firmat as a “a civil status” at the “junction of national identity and citizenship” (Pérez-Firmat, 3). Following the Cuban Revolution, the idea of national identity is tied tightly to the concept of civic duty, defined by one’s service to the advancement of revolutionary goals and ideology through support of the Cuban state.

This understanding of national identity served the goals of the Revolution well as it provided a unifying image that defined *lo cubano*⁶ while promoting a national identity tied directly to the Cuban state. Beyond furthering support for the Revolution, this formulation of national identity also marginalizes those who did not identify with Castro’s socialist state. Thus, Cubans who voiced their discontent with state policy⁷, or those who simply defined their national identity outside of the state⁸, found themselves ostracized from the community bonded by this specific conceptualization of national identity. Many of those outside the Cuban state’s image of Cubanness leave the island and join the Cuban exile community, which generally adopted negative views of Castro’s state (Chomsky, 79). For these early émigrés, the separation from the Cuban state necessitated a separation from the state’s accepted idea of national identity, provoking tensions between Cubans on and off the island.

When economic collapse during the 1990s forced Cuba’s opening to international influences, the isolationist bubble abruptly popped, giving voice to rising criticisms of the Cuban state. With this opening, portrayals of Cuban national identity became both more accessible, as narratives from the island reached a larger audience, and more

⁶ “Cubanness”

⁷ The works of Cuban poet, writer, and eventual exile Reinaldo Arenas provide perspective on Cuban national identity in direct opposition to the Cuban state.

⁸ The censorship of the Cuban film *P.M.*, directed by Orlando Jiménez Leal and Alberto Cabrera Infante, illustrate the intolerance for even those things, such as dancing, music, and nightlife, that fall ‘outside of the Revolution.’

complicated, as Cubans began to interact with people and ideas previously unreachable. During this time, the disparities between life on and off the island, as well as the contradictions that arose on the island from the introduction of capitalism, led to the fracture of the unified national identity tied to the state. As a result, Cuban national identity is redefined during the Special Period, as many Cubans identify themselves less tightly with the faltering socialist state.

From this later time period come narratives, like those of Antonio José Ponte and Wendy Guerra, which emphasize the feeling of being lost between the revolutionary rhetoric of the past and the economic and social contradictions of the present. By highlighting the marginalization of Cubans on the island as a result of this rigid image of 'Cubanness,' these works reject the tie between the Cuban state and Cuban national identity, calling instead for a distancing between the identity of the Revolution and the identity of the Cuban people. This shift proves important for the relationship between Cubans on and off the island as those initially ostracized by the civically and ideologically defined conception of Cuban identity could possibly find acceptance in this new idea of national identity separated from the Cuban state.

Amidst this backdrop, Antonio José Ponte's narratives explore the singularity of life on an island divided between the rhetoric of its leaders and the realities of its streets. Emerging from the fall of the Soviet Union and the island's ten year long 'Special Period' struggle with economic hardship, Cubans on the island were confronted with a world of contradictions as they entered the twenty-first century. For many Cubans, the economic hardship of the Special Period marked the start of the Revolution's fading ideological fervor, though its institutions remained as ubiquitous

reminders of the State's authority over everyday life in Cuba. This opposition between the Revolution's symbolic and tangible presence in Cuba left Cubans on the island adrift, living somewhere between the idealized socialist state sketched by Castro and Guevara in the Revolution's early years and the Havana *barrios*⁹ darkened by blackouts, food shortages, and inequality.

Published in a collection titled *Cuentos de todas partes del imperio*¹⁰, Ponte's narrative *Un arte de hacer ruinas*¹¹ examines the disjointed nature of life in Cuba after the Special Period. Set against the hyper-realistic images of Havana's crumbling buildings, the mysterious and bizarre world explored in this work embody the dichotomy of Cuban national identity as imagined by the revolutionary state, the outside world looking in, and the Cubans on the island living between these extremes.

Ponte's work begins with a practical question: with no space left to expand a Havana home, where's a Cuban to turn? While the answer to this question lies in the construction of *barbacoas*, lofts, the answer to the larger question of where Cubans are to find a space to reconstruct their national identity proves to be more complicated. In response to this question, trends in Cuban film show a shift towards the social documentary,¹² while Cuban writers gain recognition through works in the internationally popular dirty realist genre,¹³ and Cuban architects move in an effort to protect Havana's historic colonial architecture while simultaneously trying to develop an infrastructure

⁹ neighborhoods

¹⁰ Published in English as *Tales from the Cuban Empire*

¹¹ Published in English as "A Knack for Making Ruins"

¹² Fernando Pérez's 2003 film *Suite Habana* provides an excellent example of the social documentary as well as the themes that become popular within this style.

¹³ The three book *Dirty Havana Trilogy*, authored by Cuban Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, is the best-known work of Cuban dirty realism.

able to support Havana's growing population.¹⁴ Opening his work with the familiar image of Havana's deteriorating colonial-style buildings, Ponte presents perhaps the most archetypal image of Special Period Cuba, though he goes beyond the much-consumed paradigm of a crumbling socialist state to analyze the effect of this deterioration for Cubans on the island.

The crumbling facades and exposed rebar attracted foreigners from around the world who flocked to Havana to witness the decay of Cuba's colonial architecture and socialist society (Freeman). Because Cuba's streets remained out of reach for most Americans following the Cold War, Havana carried an allure of the unknown, with its mid-century cars and socialist government. As economic hardship during the Special Period forced the redevelopment of Cuba's tourist industry, Cuban culture became a commodity product, a phenomenon decidedly antagonistic to the goals of the revolutionary government. Tourists flocked to Cuba to see the crumbling colonial buildings alongside the images of Che and Martí with the popular revolutionary slogans, betraying their "prurient attraction to decay" (Freeman).

While the state suddenly began welcoming tourists, including Cuban exiles, Cubans on the island expressed a growing disenchantment both with the revolutionary state, which appeared to be faltering on its ideological principals, and with the foreigners arriving on the island hungry for a taste of 'the real Cuba.' Chomsky writes that "the generation that came of age during the Special Period tended to be less impressed with the Revolution's achievements, and more cynical about its contradictions," while Coco

¹⁴ Again described by historian Belmont Freeman in "History of the Present."

Fusco, in her investigation of *jineterismo*¹⁵ and the commodification of Cuban culture, writes that “tourism in its varied manifestations in Latin America is a theater for the playing out of colonialism's unfinished business” (Chomsky, 126; Fusco, 137). This disenchantment with the socialist revolution, as described by Chomsky, allowed for more criticisms of the Cuban State and its place at the center of Cuban identity, while the disdain for cultural *jineterismo*, described by Fusco, hints at a hunger to reshape Cuban national identity in contrast to the ideology of the Cuban state and the desires of the foreigners now flocking to Havana *en masse*.

Ponte’s narrative of the search for identity comes from this economic, social, and cultural context of Special Period Cuba. While contemplating the haphazard condition of the apartment buildings of Havana, with their makeshift *barbacoas*, the protagonist’s aging professor reflects on the degeneration surrounding them with a sense of nostalgia, remembering “*todas las ciudades que iba a ser esta ciudad*”¹⁶ (Ponte, 59). While this remark references the idea of a failed Revolution, it carries a nostalgic longing for the promises made at the Revolution’s outset, capturing a more nuanced attitude of Cubans towards the revolutionary state. For Cubans who were born and grew up under the Revolution, the state had raised the Cuban standard of living to a level beyond that of nearly all other Latin American nations, with sweeping advancements in education, healthcare, and infrastructure (Chomsky, 89). Furthermore, Chomsky, referencing Miren Uriarte, asserts that “while the lack of hard currency meant that these peso expenditures couldn’t resolve shortages of medicines, materials, and

¹⁵ Literally, *jineterismo* refers to prostitution, however in the context of Special Period Cuba, the term is used to refer to the commodification of Cuban culture through the growing tourist industry.

¹⁶ “all the cities that this city [Havana] was going to be”

infrastructure, Miren Uriarte emphasized that the government's continuing commitment to its social welfare role distinguished Cuba's path"¹⁷ (Chomsky, 132). The nostalgic longing expressed by Ponte's character mirrors this more nuanced relationship between Cubans on the island during the Special Period and the Cuban state. While the tangible improvements of the Revolution earned it a place within Cuban national identity, the recognition of its current failure to deliver on its promises displaces the state from the heart of Cuban identity.

Confronted with the conflict between Cuba as described by others and Cuba as seen from the ground, Ponte's protagonist continues to express a sense of feeling lost, introducing a theme central to his own narrative and the larger narrative on Cuban identity during the Special Period. He describes his own feeling of disconnection from the world surrounding him, remarking that "*hubo un momento en que sentí que, de abrir una ventana, no la encontraríamos [la Habana] allá afuera*" (Ponte, 59).¹⁸ While the comment refers literally to the city waiting outside his window, the fracture between competing images of Cuba (as an innovative, egalitarian society and as a failed socialist experiment) fosters a growing sense of disenchantment among the island's people. The protagonist expresses his own perspective on his city, as a place of contradiction and confusion. Despite being in his home, a place that should be familiar, the protagonist feels lost and stuck between parallel realities. While the protagonist straddles life in Havana, among the crumbling buildings and economic hardships, and a mysterious underworld below the city, many Cubans during this time find themselves straddling

¹⁷ Uriarte, Miren. "Social Policy Responses to Cuba's Economic Crisis of the 1990's." *Cuban Studies*, vol. 35, 2004, pp. 105-136.

¹⁸ "there was a moment in which I felt that, upon opening a window, we wouldn't find Havana outside"

different kinds of parallel realities – realities that stem from conflicting images on Cuban national identity and everyday life on the island.

The text goes on to describe the singularity of life in Cuba that results from this conflict, writing that “*De niño la geografía apasiona mucho más que la historia. Otros países importan más que otras épocas... Será que todavía no tenemos que empezar nuestros viajes en el tiempo*” (Ponte, 61).¹⁹ While furthering the image of life in Cuba as a place of paradox, Ponte’s writing points also to the isolating effect of this paradox for Cubans on the island. Though the introduction of tourism and capitalist markets in Cuba seemingly lessens the island’s isolation from the rest of the world, they also foster a sense of isolation (in time) stemming from the lasting presence of revolution-era values in modern Havana, where capitalism was bringing with it social and economic inequality that directly opposed the goals of the Revolution. The contemplations of Ponte’s protagonist mirror the isolation that Cubans during this time feel due to a sense of detachment from the Revolution and its’ failed goals (*el tiempo*) and from the outside world (*otros países*), which has been separated from Cuba for so long that the two are hardly recognizable.

The protagonist’s tutor later adds “*el tiempo, como deben haberte enseñado, es un espacio más. Ahora te toca explorarlo*” (Ponte, 62).²⁰ With this comment, the tutor offers hope for the opportunity to escape the contradictions that characterize life in Cuba and construct something new. Paralleled to the place of revolutionary ideology in Cuba during this time, this escape from contradiction represents an opportunity to

¹⁹ “As a kid, geography is much more important than history. Other countries matter more than other times. It could be that we still don’t need to begin our travels in time”

²⁰ “time, as they should have taught you, is just another space. Now it’s your turn to explore it.”

separate the Revolution from the idea of what it means to be Cuban. While the Revolution and its values had defined Cuban national identity for many years previously, and in the process ostracized Cuban-Americans, the Revolution's early successes receded further from the minds of Cubans on the island and the state's failure to make good on their promises consumed everyday life, evidenced by the food shortages, blackouts, and growing economic inequality.

Faced with the question of how, and if, Cubans on the island can reconcile this sense of isolation and lostness, Ponte returns to the popular image of Havana's decaying architecture. His response begins with a dismal outlook describing the fall of Havana into a state of disrepair, writing that "*la gente podía copar un edificio hasta hacerlo caer*" (64).²¹ While here Ponte seems to condemn Havana, and its people, to doom, he later offers a more hopeful outlook, adding that "*se hacían un espacio donde no parecía haber más, empujaban hasta meter sus vidas,*"²² and later, "*el empeño de esos edificios en no caer, en no volverse ruinas*" (Ponte 64, 65).²³ The former quote indicates a hope for creating a new space for Cubans, despite the apparent current lack of that space. In the latter quote, the determination of Havana's buildings to not become ruins mirrors the resilience of the Cuban people in not falling with the faltering socialist state. Here it is implied that Cubans, who for years had been prescribed the state's image of 'Cubanness,' could now reconstruct and alter that image into their own.

Ponte's outlook offered here provides a hope for Cubans on the island to make themselves a new space to reconstruct their identity, despite the marginalization that

²¹ "the people could take over a building until making it fall"

²² "they made a space where there seems to be nothing left, they push on until fitting in their lives"

²³ "the determination of these building to not fall, to avoid becoming ruins"

identity has faced due to ideas imposed by the state and outsiders alike. Like the story's protagonist, who searches for his place between the streets of Havana and the mysterious city below, Cubans during the Special Period searched for their place between the revolutionary rhetoric of the past and the much less idyllic present that occupied their daily lives.

Finally, Ponte suggests that like Havana's crowded neighborhoods, Cubans take a creative approach to making themselves a home on their island. He closes his work with the suggestion that "*Cuando no encuentras tierra nueva, cuando estás cercado, puede quedarte todavía un recurso: sacar a relucir la que está debajo de lo construido. Excavar, caminar en lo vertical*" (Ponte, 67).²⁴ These final words offer hope that despite the conflict that Cubans' national identity has been subject to, a possibility still remains for Cubans on the island to reclaim as their own a new identity, or *caminar en lo vertical*. This suggestion represents a poignant shift in ideas surrounding Cuban identity as it offers the possibility of an identity not centered around that of the Revolution.

This suggestion can be analyzed as a refutation of the Cuban state's own use of history in defining national identity as it aligned with the goals of the Revolution. The state often used art²⁵, literature and poetry²⁶, and political imagery²⁷, to disseminate a uniform idea of Cuban national identity. In contrast, Ponte suggests the construction of a novel identity that diverges further from the tie between national identity and the state.

²⁴ "When you don't find new land, when you're closed in, one last resource remains for you: going out to re-build what lies beneath the constructed. To excavate, to look to the vertical."

²⁵ Poster art, like that of René Mederos Pazos, demonstrates the Revolution's efforts to rally Cubans behind images of the revolutionary heroes.

²⁶ The Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, who wrote social-protest poetry related to the colonial history of oppression, was one of these writers lauded by the revolutionary cultural institutes.

²⁷ Images of revolutionary heroes, like Che, Martí, and Cienfuegos were, and remain, ubiquitous in Cuba.

This drive to reclaim Cuban national identity becomes paramount in later narratives, which capture a further nuanced view of being Cuban moving into the twenty-first century, and in the process, include more groups of the Cuban diaspora in '*lo cubano*.'

With the worst years of the Special Period behind them, Cuba entered the second decade of the twenty-first century with growing international presences on the island and expanding capitalist influences. While Cuba seemed to be moving towards a free-market state, Chomsky takes a more skeptical view, stating that Cubans

“had to face contemporary realities that did not live up to revolutionary dreams. The Revolution was supposed to bring equality – but what was visible in the 1990s was a growing inequality. The Revolution was supposed to bring an end to national economic dependence and neocolonial relations, but the 1990s brought a renewed influx of foreign tourists and foreign investment, now heralded as Cuba’s salvation.” (Chomsky, 154).

Chomsky later speaks to the disillusionment of the younger Cuban generations during this time, stating that, “This background lent the changes of the 1990s and early 2000s a poignancy, or even anguish. For those who came of age in the Special Period of the 1990s, those early decades seem a distant chimera” (Chomsky, 154). Amidst advancing globalization and fading revolutionary ideology, Cuban national identity continued to stray further from that of the revolutionary state. Narratives from the island in this later time period mirrored the changes in Cuba that allowed Cubans to interact more freely with those off the island, though the discordance between the state’s still

prominent power over the lives of Cubans and the fading reality of the revolution's rhetoric remained a powerful motif.

Published in 2016, after Ponte's narrative, Wendy Guerra's novel *Domingo de Revolución*²⁸ further pushes the limits of how Cuban national identity is defined in the twenty-first century. Like Ponte, Guerra's narrative rejects, even more explicitly, the state's role in defining *lo cubano*, turning the Cuban State into her novel's antagonist. Without relinquishing her protagonist, Cleo's, connection to her homeland, Guerra writes a narrative in which the Cuban state forces Cubans away from the island. Furthermore, Cleo's tense relationship with wealthy Cuban exiles and with foreigners interested in life on the island implicates each of these groups in the marginalization of Cubans on the island, who are subjected to different prescribed ideas of Cuban national identity. By narrating the ill effects of these rigid views of Cuban national identity, Guerra, like Ponte, suggests the need to reconstruct the Cuban people's identity. In this push, Guerra suggests an identity that offers sanctuary, rather than forcing isolation, for the Cubans on and off the island who have suffered years of antagonism and isolation.

In this theme, Guerra's novel situates modern Cubans at the center of a battle between the Cuban state and exiles off the island. Guerra's narrative makes clear the isolation felt by Cubans on the island – suggesting, in turn, the need to redefine Cuban identity as distinct from the power of the Cuban state and from the physical borders of the island itself. This conception of Cuban identity is one less-rigidly defined, and in

²⁸ *Revolution Sunday* in English

turn, includes more Cubans off the island, who were traditionally excluded from idea of *cubanidad*, in the group of people considered ‘Cuban.’

Guerra’s novel begins with a somber recognition of the isolation to which Cubans on the island are made subject. While Ponte’s work emphasizes the dissonance that results from the Revolution’s faltering ideology, Guerra’s novel criticizes the state’s refusal to let go of their power over the Cuban people. In clinging to this power, the Cuban state becomes the principal antagonist of its people, forcing them into isolation within the borders of their own island. Guerra’s protagonist, Cleo, is the victim of such isolation, expressing a sense of abandonment by her country, describing Havana as, “*ese lugar en que la luz te encuentra allí donde te escondas. Tal vez por eso cuando uno aquí se siente solo es porque en verdad ha sido abandonado*” (Guerra, 13).²⁹ This contemplation shows Cleo, and the Cuban people, stuck without a place of their own. Even on her own island, Cleo is unable to find sanctuary as a figure that falls outside of the outline of a ‘good Cuban’ as defined by the Cuban state. Speaking further to her own relationship to the Cuban state, Cleo makes reference to exiled Cuban poet Heriberto Padilla³⁰, writing “*estoy fuera del juego. Yo no existo*” (Guerra, 17).³¹ In this excerpt, Cleo both distances herself from the state’s image of a ‘good Cuban’ (*la cubanidad*) and ties her own isolation to the state’s historical tendency to reject those outside of that contrived image.

²⁹ “that place in which the light finds you where you hide. Maybe it’s because of this that when someone feels alone here it’s because in reality, they’ve been abandoned.”

³⁰ Heberto Padilla was the poet at the center of the 1971 ‘Padilla Affair,’ in which the Cuban state received international criticism for the censorship and public renunciation of Padilla’s works, which were considered ‘counterrevolutionary.’

³¹ “I am outside the game. I don’t exist.”

Guerra more explicitly outlines the antagonism of the state's conception of Cuban national identity, writing that "*La Habana empieza a ser tu enemigo, sus habitantes, su incomodidad, la imposibilidad de estar bien, todo colabora en tu contra. Ese lugar que fue sublime hoy te agrade*" (Guerra, 19).³² With this passage, the Cuban state becomes more clearly the antagonist of its people. Where the Revolution had once offered unity and brought reprieve, it now demanded uniformity and rejected any divergence.

In addition to the isolation caused by the state's image of Cuban national identity, Cleo is made subject to marginalization by Cuban exiles, who see her choice to stay in Cuba, despite the presence of the Cuban state, as an acceptance of the government against which they identify. Initially, Cleo expresses a sense of heroism among the group of exiles, commenting that "*me sentí una heroína de la resistencia cubana. Ninguno de ellos era capaz de aguantar lo que aguantamos cada día*" (Guerra, 34).³³ This initial comment reinforces the concept that physical separation from the island necessitates a certain separation from the Cuban identity. The concept of physical distance implying cultural distance is one common to descriptions of the Cuban diaspora. Chomsky writes on the antagonism between early Cuban exiles to the U.S. and later waves of émigrés, writing that younger Cubans émigrés were "confronted with the social, political, and cultural divides [...] between Cubans in Miami and the changes occurring on the island. Miami's Cubans had tried to recreate, and preserve, the Cuba of the 1950s, before the social changes of the 1960s" (Chomsky, 79). This antagonism

³² "Havana starts to be your enemy, its habitants, its uncomfortableness, the impossibility of being well, all this collaborates against you. That place that was once sublime today attacks you."

³³ "I felt like a hero of the Cuban resistance. None of them were able to handle what we [Cubans on the island] handle each day."

created a new figure implicit in the top-down construction of Cuban identity; Cuban exiles. Cleo's strained interactions with Cuban exiles abroad mirror this antagonism, where she is cast aside for not fitting the mold of the 'good Cuban' imagined by Cubans abroad. To return again to the analysis of Pérez-Firmat, the identity of Cuban exiles aligns with the idea of *cubaneo*, which promotes a sense of community founded on cultural traditions, such as dance, music, and food. This identity is distinct from the idea of *cubanidad* in that it makes no reference to a relationship between Cubans and their island's state, an idea attractive to the Cuban exiles who generally resented Castro's Revolution and its ideology, as described above by Chomsky.

Cleo later finds direct antagonism among the Cuban diaspora, who see her as a failure for not opposing the Cuban state. The protagonist laments her exclusion from the group of exiles and conjectures that "*querían un nuevo héroe para Cuba [...] Querían un final épico, estilo soviético*" (Guerra, 41).³⁴ Among the Cuban exiles, Cleo is designated an outsider, too comfortable with the Cuban state (why else could she stay on the island?) to fit their idea of 'Cubanness,' which they defined simply as resistance against Castro's government. These tensions serve to further isolate Cubans on the island from those off the island, despite the growing accessibility of travel to and from Cuba during and after the Special Period. As Cleo's interactions with the Cuban exiles demonstrate, Cubans on the island were often separated from their fellow Cubans not only by physical distance, but also by ideological differences. While Cubans on the island, like Cleo, tended to have a more nuanced opinion towards the state, early Cuban exiles took up the opposite opinion – seeing the Cuban state as the villain that

³⁴ "They wanted a new hero for Cuba [...] They wanted an epic finale, Soviet style."

destroyed ‘their Cuba’ and forced them into exile. These contrasting attitudes towards the Cuban state, and the conception of Cuban national identity, fostered resentment among these two groups and pushed out reconciliation.

Faced with antagonism from the Cuban state, who saw her as a dissident, and from the Cuban exiles, who saw her as a supporter of the state’s oppression, Cleo eventually finds herself ostracized from both groups and left without a place of her own. Guerra’s protagonist is ultimately barred from Cuba and forced into exile where, if her previous interactions with Cuban émigrés serve as any indication, she is likely to remain isolated. Guerra closes her narrative with her protagonist’s expression of profound isolation, writing,

“Ahí afuera está mi país, necesito correr y refugiarme en mi casa, pero no me lo permiten... Poco a poco siento cómo Cuba se desprende de mi cuerpo, mi alma intenta sostener la tierra, pero ella me abandona... Sin Cuba no existo. Yo soy mi isla” (Guerra, 215).³⁵

Exiled by the state and shunned by Cuban émigrés, Guerra’s protagonist is left alone clinging to her Cuban identity though she has neither access to her physical country nor to the community typical of diaspora. From Cleo’s isolation one sees the damage done both by the traditional *cubanidad* identity tied to the island and its government, as well as the *cubaneo* identity adopted by exiles, which tries to divorce the island’s culture from its politics. Cleo’s own identity falls into neither of these

³⁵ “Out there is my country, I need to run and hide myself in my house, but they won’t let me. . . Little by little I feel how Cuba detaches from my body, my soul tries to keep hold of the land, but she abandons me. . . Without Cuba I don’t exist. I am my island.”

categories, and instead allows for a more abstract sense of identity not linked directly to the state, but also not completely divorced from the island's political environment. While Guerra's narrative offers little hope for her own protagonist, the unfortunate end of Cleo's story points, like Ponte's work, to the need for a reconstruction of Cuban national identity that brings together the Cuban people, on and off the island.

While Cubans were faced with intense economic hardship and the faltering promises of the socialist revolution, the Special Period forced a reexamination of Cubans' relationship to their island. While Ponte's work, with the parallel universes of Havana's streets and the mysterious city lying below, emphasizes the discordance between the ideology of the Revolution and the hardship of the present, Guerra's narrative, which explores the experience of Cubans on and off their island, expands the sense of isolation to include not only the conflict between the Revolution's past and present, but also the role of different sects of Cuban society in the definition of national identity. Both pieces demonstrate a need for belonging left unfulfilled by existing outlines of Cuban national identity. While *cubanidad* forces a relationship between the people and their government and in the process outcasts those in disagreement with the state, *cubaneo* too wholly disregards the role of the Revolution's past and present in the lives of Cubans today. From Cuban narratives written during and after the Special Period comes a call to reshape Cuban identity in a less rigid sense. This new construction better accommodates the complicated and nuanced relationship between Cubans on the island, the Cuban state, and the Cuban diaspora.

Today Cuba remains a place of contradiction – a nation both built on and torn apart by its socialist Revolution. Presently, Cuban national identity continues to be redefined as revolutionary ideology fades further from everyday life and the island opens itself more so to the outside world, including the Cuban diaspora. Recent narratives from Cubans on and off the island deal directly with the question of what it means to be Cuban today; a novel exploration of the Cuban experience that recognizes the singularity of life on an island whose narrative has been fought over for decades. Emigration literature³⁶ deals directly with the question of staying in or leaving Cuba, incorporating this question into the conceptualization of Cuban national identity. On the other hand, ideas of Cuban identity emphasizing non-political aspects of Cuban culture are subject to criticism from Cubans on and off the island for being non-authentic representations of life in Cuba.³⁷ The works of Ponte and Guerra, taking place during and after the Special Period, explore the isolation of Cubans on the island and the need to reshape Cuban identity in a way that unites, rather than divides, the Cuban people. This shift away from the *cubanidad* and *cubaneó* conceptions of national identity makes a space where Cubans on and off the island can find solace and provides hope for the reconciliation of these groups.

³⁶ Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti's films *Nada +* and *Viva Cuba* deal with the question of emigration, as does Wendy Guerra's earlier novel *Todos se van* (*Everyone Leaves*).

³⁷ The popularity of the Cuban musical group *Buena Vista Social Club*, which was popular in Cuba pre-Revolution and 'rediscovered' by American producer Ry Cooder, is one example of an idea of Cuban identity removed from politics – gaining them popularity among U.S. and European audiences despite the criticisms received from Cubans on and off the island.

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